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Certain Stories is a collection of original short fiction involving characters whose lives have been stunted emotionally, economically, and sexually, and the subsequent battle to relieve themselves from self-inflicted binds. These characters run the gamut of age and geographic placement, each of which plays a role in defining the voice they use to narrate their stories. The author has attempted to conclude each story honestly and respectfully, and to adequately provide an ideal narrative vehicle for each character in *Certain Stories* to drive.

CERTAIN STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TRIVIAHOLICS

Out of the following foods, which would Gandhi eat for breakfast?

To my right is a woman named Mary Marsburgh. She's got a habit of blushing under tension, and it isn't working to her advantage beneath the lights in front of the studio audience. We're in a strong viewer demographic, the coveted twenty-five to thirty-five educated crowd which means anyone who's anyone is watching. I can tell you right now her blushing problem will definitely show on television, even through the makeup.

She won't have to be embarrassed about it for a while. We're taping the show three months in advance. She scribbles her answer on the blue electronic writing tablet, chews her lip, and her skin grows maroon. Lord help her. We're given three options: sausage, pancakes, or apples. Mahatma Gandhi was a vegetarian, which means apples or pancakes. But, then you break it down further and factor in the economic impact of establishing a functioning industry just to process flour and there's nothing else to go with. Apples it is.

That's why Mary won't win. She can't figure this stuff out. We're told to quit writing and I look over through the bright and quiet studio and her face is filled with blood, her hand tapping a million miles a minute. I'm worried she won't make it to the second round. Then we have the contestant to her right, Robert Borger. He's brave. He tells her to pipe down, then glares at her kids in the front row. They're all hooked on video games so they don't notice. She gives him the fastest, most vicious look I've seen

(cameras would have to move fast to pick that one up, even with contemporary digital processing and onboard hard drives and all that). But then she turns back to the announcer, who points a pen at me and tells me to give my answer.

“Apples,” I say.

“Correct,” he says. One point for me. I smile like I’m supposed to and he adds two thousand points to my score, bringing me up near eight thousand. Plenty of time to take the lead from Robert in the second round.

Mary’s not faring so well, what with choosing pancakes and all. Maybe I should ask her to dinner. I don’t notice a husband with the kids. Then again, she is down to fourteen hundred points, and to be seen at a restaurant with third place when my quiz show career is just kicking in probably wouldn’t be a wise move. Robert clears his throat and says apples but the monitor clearly shows shit-for-brains sausages.

“You wrote down ‘sausages’. I’m sorry, that’s incorrect,” the announcer says.

Robert straightens his tie, still in the lead with a hefty ninety-five hundred points. He manages to smile into the gliding cameras.

We’ll be right back. Time to pay the bills.

The on-screen vertigo isn’t real. It’s just a trick of the cameras. One of those half million dollar suckers is on a crane, floating around the studio, a wide angle lens picking up everything, even Mary’s blush. It’s not so exciting when you’re on the ground and it happens around you but not to you.

In the audience is a mystery woman. My mystery woman. She’s been watching me the whole time. All through the first round. Big eyes and blonde hair

keeping me looking back. There's something unabashed about her, like she wants to connect to me. I bet she's got a brain in her beautiful head. She's been sitting to the right of the announcer, making it easy for me to shift my gaze without looking more than a little distracted. My son's been sitting to the announcer's left but he rarely looks up. He's got homework or something. That first question, when I answered that pizza came from Naples, oh that woman's eyes flared up and she gave me a thumbs up and I thought you and me babe, pizza and a documentary on the complex mishmash that is the Spanish political party system, the two of us could go nowhere and anywhere at the same time. *Let's hear a little bit about our contestants.*

What I don't want to tell the asshole in a toupee swinging a microphone around: Initially there was no intention of my competing on game shows. My son was perfectly content with prizes won from radio contests. Kent Rocker, a local DJ, asked trivia questions on Friday mornings. I always got them right. On the way to school my son would reach his small hands to the stereo and search for the right channel. Kent Rocker, in my opinion, did everything a DJ should. He had a distinguished voice – intelligent, ecstatic, raspy, consistent. You knew it was him when you reached the channel. Didn't even have to look down at the numbers on the radio. Mr. Rocker was more than a guy in a studio, he was a personality.

“Trivia time, who is Paul Reubens better known as?”

And I would call on my cell phone and say, “Pee Wee Herman.”

Or he would say, “In 1986, would Lee Iacocca have driven a Ford or Chrysler?”

And I would call and say, “A Chrysler, because he left Ford in 1978 and went to Chrysler shortly after.”

After I picked him up from school, my son and I drove down to the radio station and picked up our free Kent Rocker t-shirts and coffee mugs, concert tickets and coupons for free burritos.

The best part? My son never asked how I knew all of this random information. I guess he just thought I was smart because I was his dad and I knew everything he needed to know, like how to double-knot his shoes, or not to eat too much cheese or he would have problems going to the bathroom. He didn’t know that I stayed home all day while he was at school, surfing the Internet and watching the Discovery Channel because I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving the house on my own and possibly running into his mother.

I think about the mystery woman as I sip a mug of inferior coffee. The show has a seven digit budget and can only afford grounds scraped from the bottom of Lake Placid. If the coffee was better, maybe the other contestants and I wouldn’t be sitting in different corners, facing the walls, internally chanting our own mantras. It’s cold, too, but I manage to repeat a scenario where the mystery woman slides her arms around me from behind and keeps me warm. We could start there. Work our way to other things.

My button up shirt isn’t thick enough and I wonder why Robert isn’t shivering too. Maybe he’s faking me out? In the studio the mystery woman kept touching the collar of her shirt, like she was anxious. A come on? I’ll take it as such. I wonder if she knows the answers to the questions, and if she minds that I’m balding in the back of my head.

And the front, I guess. If I sleep with her tonight I'll have to get up early and comb my hair so my scalp doesn't look like the remains of a stripped Brazilian rain forest.

"John," Mary says. Her face is normal. Not nearly as idiotic looking when she's calm. "Do I sound like a moron when I talk?"

She's not a threat so I go easy on her. "I think we all sound like morons," I say. "But you're definitely the least moronic."

"Speak for yourself," Robert says. "I'm no moron."

The attention sign flashes above the door. I shake myself off, line up with Mary and Robert and walk into a lime green hallway leading to the stage. I'm first to my podium and Robert flicks me in the ribs as he passes. I grip my side and smile to the crowd through clenched teeth. What I'm feeling is pain. What I'm thinking is perversion. I'm thinking myself and his wife on his office desk. On his car hood. I'm thinking most women believe there are nine erogenous zones. I will show her twelve.

What I tell the asshole swinging the microphone around: He asks me about the strange punishment my grandmother used to use when I was little. I tell him she took everything out of my room and made me sit in there all day when I was bad. And boy was I. First she took my music so I wouldn't have anything to listen to. Then she took my comic books so I didn't have anything to read. After a while she'd even taken the posters off the wall so I didn't have anything to look at. I'm sitting in the middle of my room wondering what to do with myself. It's been hours. Finally I dig in my closet and find a dusty set of encyclopedias. I lie in bed all afternoon learning about everything starting with A. The next day I move on to B. Then C. And so on. That's how I became a

knowledge hound, I say, which is complete bullshit. People laugh anyway. Especially my sexy admirer. She's laughing her ass off. My son doesn't notice, though.

In reality I never knew my grandmother. Right now we're surviving on child support payments from my ex-wife, a private practice attorney. If I do well on the show I can walk away with twenty thousand dollars and a new SUV with enough seats for my son and his buddies. I haven't told you my son's name yet because that's another story.

Mary talks about digging up potatoes in her garden. She didn't even know they grew underground! Robert talks about his first son being sick with a cough and standing at the doctor's office confused with all the terminology. "Well, I just thought since it wasn't all about me anymore I should start doing some research and make sure I give my son the best care possible. After all, he's the future." Congratulations, Robert Borger, you're this year's Ms. New York.

Time for round two where the point values double. Which of these items was not in the unique sandwich Elvis Presley supposedly loved in his later years: bread, avocado, peanut butter, or bacon?

Mary knows the answer to this one. Her face is a clear white sheen, almost ghostly. She pens it into her tablet. The studio's cooler than when we left the stage earlier. My theory is they keep it cool to keep us from sweating. It does the opposite for me, though. A cold sweat forms across my expanding forehead and I'm starting to worry because the mystery woman is staring at me and I wonder if she's looking at my hairline. My ex-wife used to say I always worried about losing my hair when I was under a lot of stress. Nervously I touched my hair and considered it. She'd laugh and turn back to her

files. When things were looking up the thought never even entered my mind. Like when I'd finish a brisk jog and finish out the day lounging on the couch, reading a Peanut Butter Town book to my son. His name is Truman. He's a pretty good kid.

The Peanut Butter Town books have an entire line dedicated to this hairy yellow creature named Samson, who is sometimes a superhero. Most of the time, though he's a kid and he goes to school and hangs out with his single mom. Real progressive, these books. Anyway, Truman is another character and the writers treat him unfairly. He's the kid that gives Samson a crummy colored pencil in exchange for a good one. He's the one that bosses Samson around and convinces him to play in the construction site, leading to him getting his arm stuck in a cement mixer. But what kid hasn't been an asshole? If I singled out all the moments I was an idiot it would fill this television studio and two more. My point is Truman just wanted a nice colored pencil, and he sent Samson to the construction site because he didn't want him on his baseball team. What kids don't want good drawing tools and a team that'll succeed? That's why I named my son Truman. I knew no matter how much his mom made him feel guilty for screwing up once in a while, his dad would always think he was a good kid.

"The answer is avocados," I say. "Bananas were on the sandwich."

Mary and Robert both earn two thousand points as well. Now I'm having a hard time concentrating. In three months my ex-wife will see this and I can't help but think that wherever she's going to watch it, the place will be nice. When we were together our couches were comfortable and the thermostat was tuned in to our bodily desires and the

music always bumped along to our personal rhythm, like the environment was our own metronome. At least, when she was home that's what it was like.

Her television will be larger than mine. Her internet connection faster. Her drinks smoother. And the man I'm sure she'll be with-loving every minute of it.

Challenge question. Write down your wager.

I fucking will. Robert and I have been toe to toe this round, but he is still up by fifteen hundred points. I can safely wager three thousand and, worst case scenario, stay above Mary if she gets the question right. Also, if Robert gets the question wrong and wagers nothing I'll still overtake him. Nothing too complex. Mary's sweating, but she's the only one.

Second place gets a trip anywhere in the continental United States. I've already got my destination picked out, if I don't take first.

"Everyone ready? Good."

Truman's made a friend. One of Mary's spawnlings has sat next to him and they're playing a handheld gaming system made in Japan and imported to the U.S. Truman's not playing, but his eyes are transfixed on the device's tiny monitor. It can display up to forty thousand colors and refresh up to thirty million pixels a second. My ex-wife never allowed him to have videogames. I haven't relented yet. I'm not ready to go through the motions of turning his entire world upside down. Some rules have to remain. Besides, the last thing I need is for the one person left in my life to succumb to another world. He already spends too much time in his head, reading.

Our local library became our second home after Truman convinced me to sign up for the game show. I haven't worked much in the year since my wife left us to pursue a partner in her father's firm and, in turn, her career. I've been left juggling depression and full-time parenthood, so I spent my time researching and staring at Truman from across the room, forgetting about real work. Child support payments are good when your ex is a lawyer. I never worry about getting myself new clothes. I use the money on Truman. He still has the private education and shows up for visitation at her place looking fancy. I once saw a documentary on Bolivian sweat shops and grew less fond of purchasing new clothes for myself anyway.

So I sat at a table in the library in my torn up jeans, learning about sporting games in Tibet centered around yaks—yak skiing and yak polo are very popular—while Truman skimmed picture books and, eventually, progressed to reading lengthy novels I couldn't lift at his age.

He's an amazing boy, really. When I was Truman's age I played a lot of baseball in my parents' acre-wide backyard in the heart of Idaho. The land had once been a famous apple orchard and distillery for cider before the trees were cut down during prohibition. There were still large stumps jutting from the ground that I used for the bases I'd run after cracking a ball over the fence into the neighbors' yard. I dodged invisible infielders whose rubbery arms forced me to weave in all directions.

I was the MVP of every game. I was unbeatable. I wrote my stats on a notepad I hung around my neck. I was in the starting lineup. I won the pennant. Then my father fell asleep and drove his Lincoln onto the opposite lane of a country road and was killed

instantly. My mother was in the passenger seat asleep with her coat pulled up to her chin (at least, that's how she was described to me). She died two nights later alone in the hospital.

I was never taken to see her before she stopped breathing. Blood on the brain, I was told. I wrote it down on the notepad. And he always asked her to stay awake for those night drives.

I don't remember the question, but I know the answer was the Duke of Edinburgh. The mystery woman's arms would feel really good right now.

Where is the Xanadu of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous poem currently located?

Truman is seven. He's pretty tall for his age. He also likes to sing in the bathtub. I turn on the closed captioning when he sings. Reading the television is more interesting because you can imagine the actors and moderators as having soothing, silky voices. When the television sound is off, commercial announcers fail to startle me. The game show co-host's voice sounds more like a woman you've loved, or, as I imagine her, your mother as she places you in your crib on a night when you haven't been fussy. My mother had a soft voice. She came outside to get you for dinner, rather than yell through the window like other kids' parents.

I've been daydreaming. Robert and Mary have their answers crafted, their faces in smug poses, waiting for my answer as the music winds down. I jot down, "Inner Mongolia, China," and stand back, my clammy hands gripping the podium. PBS showed a documentary on Coleridge once. His father died when he was young, too. But Coleridge went to a boarding school and didn't have to stay with a middle-aged partner

from his father's legal practice. That's how I met my wife. She was something of a sister to me for a while but not in a strange way. Our relationship was innocent, until we both graduated at the top of our class and went off to college together, her to study legal matters and me to, well, consider life, I suppose, because she graduated quickly and I took classes that, in the end, added up to a seven-year degree in General Studies. My trust fund had given me too much freedom I suppose.

My answer is correct. Truman looks up and smiles at me. First time he's looked at me all night. My mystery woman is nowhere to be seen.

Who's going to win it? Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion of Triviaholics.

"You should do some pushups before we head back out," Robert says. "You're going to look scrawny on the television." He's flexing into a mirror, his face looking into the reflection, but not at his arms. He's looking at me. "They say television adds ten pounds. But if you're skinny, it does the opposite."

Mary checks her shirt to make sure it isn't manipulating her figure in any unflattering ways. It is but that doesn't matter anymore. I look at my hands, the skin clinging to the bones. Not eating is having its toll. Robert is gargantuan in comparison. His biceps are as large as my head. The mystery woman must have been crazy to be looking at me. She's missing out on the genuine man standing two podiums to the right in a nice black suit. Perhaps she's got a thing for the malnourished type. I popped a button on my shirt on the way into the studio and the wardrobe department didn't offer to fix it. My armpits are growing dark with sweat. And my hair, with its cactus field resemblance, is certainly not presentable anymore.

The makeup lady stops in and swoops a comb over my head, taking a clump of hair with her. I feel bald and scattered, like someone has shaken my head empty of everything.

“John boy,” Robert says, lining up somewhere behind Mary and me. “It was just a friendly psyche out. Don’t take this game so seriously.”

Robert’s son isn’t in the audience today, and really, if he lost it all right now he’d go back to his job developing websites for his marketing firm right down the street in old NYC. If I had his life I wouldn’t care so much about winning. As it is I want to win just to keep him from smiling.

I’m trailing by less than a thousand points when we step behind our podiums. Mary doesn’t have nearly enough to win, but if Robert and I wager everything she’s still got a good chance at getting second place, which would give her a vacation to any place in the continental United States. My favorite place in the country doesn’t involve presidents or famous battles or Botox starlets or democracy of any sort and I want to be able to show it to my son before it’s gone, because I received word a few months back that the place might not be there much longer. It’s important he see it just once in his life. Almost as important as my seeing it again. Even if we win the money, and not the trip, I’ll make sure we go.

The music ticks on and I think long and hard about the question the announcer’s given us. I wager two thousand points on knowing the most likely spot Amelia Earhart would have gone into hiding if she survived. I draft my answer on the blue tablet and place my hands firm on the side of the podium. I’m going to win the trip. I’m sure of it.

My son, in the audience, has stopped looking at Mary's child's game and is looking up at me with his wide blue eyes. I don't think he understands what all of this means. The game. Proving to him that I can be something special. A winner of sorts. Proving that I understand how to give him the life he needs.

The lights start glowing over the stage and I shield my eyes. As they adjust, I remove my hand and watch the announcer take his cards and straighten them against his own podium. His grey hair seems to resonate power, an understanding of knowledge, a comprehension of the world's secret needs. Maybe he understands the mystery woman, who is standing to his left again. My knees go weak.

"Let's see those answers starting with John," he says.

My answer flashes on the large screen on the front of my podium. "I'm sorry, John," he says.

"I know," I say. I look down at my feet and wonder why they didn't give me new shoes to wear on stage. My ratty sneakers are an embarrassment. My arms are sweaty. I'm a mess.

"No, you don't," the announcer says. "I'm sorry that you only wagered two thousand points. Your answer is correct. You correctly deciphered the connection between the flight path and the crash point and narrowed it down to the country she would have most likely fled to. Earhart was crafty."

The mystery woman claps in approval. I shrug and adjust my tie nervously. I can't help but smile. Everyone is smiling, except for Mary's family. Her son punches Truman

in the arm. I want to jump from behind the podium. But Truman just holds a gaze on him, then turns back to the stage.

“John, I’m sorry, but Robert’s correct answer means you are not our first place winner today. You will, however, be taking a nice trip to anywhere in the continental United States.”

I stand at my podium holding on to the edges, thinking about Truman running the stumps in the back yard, if they are still there, the rabbits watching him from a distance; the neighbors’ yard filled with lost baseballs. His mother would never have given him that opportunity because she doesn’t approve of the feisty nature of children. That feisty nature is all I want back.

I charge out of the studio with Truman in tow. Dragging his little body behind me. Looking through the long and white hallways for a flash of that blonde hair, a trace of her large and scrutinizing brown eyes. We won’t get the trip for another three months, after the show airs, but I’ll be damned if I’m not taking this woman out for a drink tonight. We could really make something of this town for one night if only I can find her.

But there she is, posing for a photograph with Robert. She’s holding on to his large arms by an exit door, admiring his nice black suit. He whispers something into her ears, takes time to push her hair back and brush up close to her. They both spot me and Truman and wave our way, with no effort to move toward us. Robert gives a little wink. Pats my mystery woman on the ass. I know it was a long shot, but damn, Lord, give me a break.

How can they build these studios without restrooms? Up and down the hall we look and don't find one. Truman starts a low and irritating whine and keeps holding himself like the muscles in his urethra won't contract and hold it in for him. Finally I find a security guard who points us down another hallway and tells us there's an unmarked door on the right that doesn't look like a bathroom, but really is and to not tell anyone else about it. So we go there.

And look who it is. The blushing Mary with her three children. They're all waiting for the restroom. Truman eyes the boy who punched him, then holds himself some more. The boy doesn't look back. He's still playing his video game. If only he knew what goes on inside that device. It would ruin the magic for him to know thirty Japanese technicians spent five years of their lives developing the toy he'll break in a couple of months. That doesn't include the software programmers.

"Mary," I say. "Do you mind if Truman uses the restroom first?"

She looks at him doing his bathroom dance. "Sure," she says. "Edward, let Truman in front of you."

"Whatever," Edward says. He looks up from the screen and steps back, allowing Truman in front of him. Her other two children look comatose against the wall.

"They're tired," she says. "It's a long show to sit through."

"It's a half hour," I say.

"Different generation."

Mary watches as a man steps out of the restroom and Truman steps in. I'm still wondering if she has a husband and, if she doesn't, if she'd want to come get a drink with

me. We could get up early in the morning and step around that little square where they film “Good Morning America” and watch the personalities get their faces painted by makeup artists and remember how the same thing had happened to us the night before. Maybe we could take all the kids to Sbarro’s in Times Square while we’re still in the same town and then, maybe if things work out between us, we can take a little trip together to Idaho. Truman might like that. He’s a good kid. He deserves it.

DAY SHIFT

“Darling,” he said. “Come into my office when you’ve got a sec.” Thompson looked at my chest to let me know what he wanted and stood there, waiting while I inched off of the step stool and onto the dirty floor with those heavy peaches before moving, and even then, he didn’t leave. He just scooted his bulky frame aside and watched my ass shuffle past him.

I went to my station at the metal counter and placed the peaches on the industrial can opener. It rotated and the syrup spilled onto the jagged lid. I took it off and poured the sugary juice into the sink and the peaches into a cobbler pan. This is what I did most days, make cobbler and pies with the white noise of the cafeteria kitchen drowning out my dreams. People talked around me but didn’t talk to me. I heard their voices as a strange muffled bounce in the air. I imagined my name sounded like three ambiguous syllables snapped together by gravity. Deborah became *Duhdahduh*. I’d been there longer than most of them so they must have imagined I was part of the cafeteria’s design, like a piece of wallpaper or a lighting fixture.

After lunch I let the machine punch my timecard and went over to Thompson’s office door, knocking quietly. Some papers shuffled behind the door so I brushed my blonde hair to the sides of my round face and wiped my hands on my pants in case they were dirty. Thompson opened the door quickly and looked around. When his eyes rested on me they grew large and angry but he kept his voice sweet.

“I didn’t think it would take you over an hour,” he said.

“I had to finish my work and eat lunch,” I said.

He looked behind him at the new girl sitting in front of his desk. “A bit of orientation here,” he said. “Come back in a half hour.” He smiled and turned back to the girl, softly closing the door. She seemed cute. Not too far from the looks I had when I was her age. Skinny neck and shoulder length blonde hair. From where I stood it didn’t look like she was hiding any paunch under her sweater, which, in Thompson’s book, meant you had great potential at Thompson’s Cafeteria.

I went back to my station and carved up a bowlful of strawberries and covered them in a red glaze with the plastic spatula like Heidi had taught me. Then I placed them in the refrigerator and went to the bathroom to clean my hands and rinse my face in the sink. I went back to Thompson’s office and this time he answered as soon as I knocked.

Thompson let me go home after visiting him in his office and I clocked out in a hurry, moving from the kitchen to the alley, my cigarette lit before the door closed. I leaned against the wall and listened to the voices floating through the concrete walls and glass windows, arriving at my ears a jumbled mess. I imagined them talking about padding their paychecks with blowjobs the way *Duhdahduh* does. Getting weekends off the *Duhdahduh* way. They would make mocking motions not three feet beyond the wall I was leaning on, Carlos standing at the dishwasher, burning his hands on the hot wet plates and laughing at Tony, who was bringing a closed fist to his puckered lips. I chuckled at the thought while exhaling smoke, and the new girl came out of the door and smiled at me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I responded and lit another cigarette.

“I know you,” she said. “Or at least my brother does.”

“Did I fuck him?” I asked.

She didn’t smile. “I don’t think so.”

“That was a joke,” I said. I was always saying dumb shit like that, and I always lowered my head in embarrassment afterward.

“He was in your class in high school. We met at a party once but you were pretty wasted.”

“That happened a lot,” I said.

We went to my apartment above The Yummy Bakery and sat on the circular rug in the living room. Her name was Alana, and she spent her first minutes in my apartment searching out the cracks in the white plaster on the ceiling and walls. I gave her some cigarettes and found out that she’d just graduated from high school and was trying to get a little bit of money together to get through her first semester at Ohio State University. I poured myself a drink and told her that I woke up one day and realized I’d forgotten to go to college. Hadn’t even applied.

“How could you just forget?” she asked.

“Some shit just came up that seemed more important,” I said, and I could tell by the way she was shaking her head through the smoke that she didn’t believe me.

“Well, you should think about going,” she said. “You really should.”

“College isn’t for me.”

I stared at the wall and wished there was a window. Alana moved to the couch and curled up with a blanket and started to drift off. She was lucky to be seventeen and still able to dream about the future. I didn't know how to tell her that I'd stopped dreaming when Bobby left and the only dream I could remember was from when he and I went camping one summer before graduation.

The forest had always seemed confining to me, and when we trudged upward, over the mountain, I felt the pressure welling up inside me wanting to burst, but I forced it back down into my stomach where I panicked, fearing it would metastasize and scar me. I followed Bobby past the cedars and down a long and veiny, root-infested path until we came upon a grassy plain with a cabin in the middle. All of it was surrounded by a bright green forest and once I saw the cabin's door the pressure lifted, just a bit, and I sat down on a damp bench made of a split log and two stumps and let out a long sigh.

Bobby dropped his pack on the ground next to me and fell to the grass and seemed shocked that the clouds were so close to his face. "They're right there," he said, and I looked up, caught a glimpse of a blue canvas with white blemishes not ten feet above me, and the pressure came back and gave me a headache so I stood up and went into the cabin and screamed because two mice scurried off of the counter when I walked in.

Bobby was sweaty, so he took his shirt off and swept up the cabin. I watched his muscles work, stretching and constricting as he moved, and his long hair was knotted up and wet. I took a few pieces of flatbread from my backpack and broke those apart, setting two mousetraps, one underneath the card table and the other underneath the sink. Then I

took the cot outside, turned it on its side, and shook off the months of dust that had settled. I heard an owl hoot and followed the tree line until I found it, grey faced, glaring at me from a knotty branch in the distance. Bobby came and stood beside me, his hand on my hip, and kissed my cheek. “If the traps don’t get them, the owls will,” he said.

Alana didn’t want to go home smelling like smoke, so I let her sleep on my couch and told her to use my shower and borrow clothes in the morning. As she snored, I thought about how shitty my apartment was. When I’d looked at it, the owner of the bakery had promised it would always smell like cookies and baked goods. He’d failed to mention I’d learn to hate the smell of cookies and rolls and fresh baked bread. Now those things, which I’d once loved, reminded me of cracked plaster and water that ran cold in the morning while the Yummy Bakery employees were washing their pots and pans.

I sometimes thought about Bobby sleeping in my bed and talking about the future. When I pictured it, I weighed fifteen pounds less from all the hiking and didn’t have to blow my boss because it would hurt Bobby and we wouldn’t need to degrade ourselves to get a weekend off or a reasonable wage.

“*Duhdahduh*,” I thought about him saying. “Relax. It’s bedtime.” And a police car cruised by, flashing red and blue lights through my panel windows.

Alana was gone when I woke and started the coffee. Bobby loved coffee the way I loved him.

Thompson wasn’t in his office the next morning when I clocked in. It was early and a droopy skeleton crew were dragging themselves from one table to another under the fluorescent lights. I got out a pie crust from the refrigerator and placed it on the metal

counter. I lined the crust with the strawberries I'd prepared the day before and placed it back in the fridge to be cut into slices later when we sold out of what was on display.

I took a smoke break and went onto the cafeteria floor to the table where Tonya was sitting. She was tall and blonde and had recently developed back problems. I thought they were from the high heeled shoes she constantly wore, but she was still wearing the shoes. She'd been Thompson's girl before I'd come along and even though I didn't care about what Thompson and I did behind closed doors, because it didn't extend beyond that, Tonya did care because for her it went into the movies and the bars and her home and his home when his wife and kids weren't around. She was rubbing her ankle when I sat down.

"Thompson's out sick, if you're wondering," she said.

"Fine by me," I said.

She leaned onto her elbows and looked closely at my face. "You mean you don't care?" she said.

"Why should I?" I grabbed her soda and sipped on it.

"New girl shows up and Thompson calls off sick," she said. "I'd be curious as hell if I were you."

I hadn't thought too much about Thompson and Alana slinking off together. He *was* a bit stern when he closed the door on me. Normally he'd tell me to meet him in the bathroom or in his car in the alley in a matter of minutes and I'd patter off to the locker room to ditch my apron and spritz some perfume.

"Screw it," I said. "Thompson wants to mess that girl up too, let him."

Tonya stood up and smoothed out her apron, shaking her head. “I’m too old to think about this anymore.”

But Tonya wasn’t old. She was only twenty-eight and still looked good even though she hunched sometimes from the pain. She hadn’t put on too much weight since I started, which was a miracle, considering the two-inch slices of ham and chicken livers and gravy and pie we hovered around every day. I wondered what it was like for her when I showed up, seventeen years old and snobbish. I’d been captivated by Thompson and the private meetings it always seemed like we were having back then.

“You’re smart,” he told me. “I trust you more than anyone in that kitchen. That’s why I’m starting you out thirty-five cents an hour more than Heidi.” Heidi was the girl who made pies before me and she always sang in the kitchen. That was before Carlos and Tony started, and the two boys before them that washed dishes, and the ex-prisoner before them. Most people didn’t have a reason to stay at Thompson’s Cafeteria, so they didn’t. But Thompson thought I had potential, and he showed it by smiling and giving me money, so I stuck around awhile to see what would happen.

I frowned, and Tonya looked down at me sadly. “Baby,” she said. “If you need to talk.” She went to the server’s station to start rolling silverware. In the back I could hear them talking, “*Duhdاده, Duhdاده*,” as I walked through the swinging door.

I slouched over the metal table and poured custard into pie crusts. I loved custard, and it was one of the reasons I’d put on weight since starting at Thompson’s. Bobby had warned me about that, before Thompson started courting me and letting me take whatever I wanted from the dessert counter for free.

Bobby had found the cabin in a dream, and even though I told him I didn't believe in all of that granola bullshit he still made love to me in the dark dusty corner of the cabin and touched me sweetly afterward. "That's why I adore you," I said, "your wonderful hands." But he was already asleep and the sound of Bobby's breathing took the anxiety out of my stomach. I fell into a heavy sleep next to him. I heard the owl, in that final dream, and ran through the woods looking for Bobby, or the owl, but all I found was a quiet stream that bent smoothly and drifted around the hills. I was frustrated and alone, sitting on a rock by the water's edge, when a wooden raft drifted toward me. I stepped into the water and shivered as it moved up to my knees. I pulled the raft toward me and found a large brown pellet made of hair and feathers so I dragged it to shore and tore it apart. Inside were a man's bones, long and white and hard, and I thought they might be Bobby's so I buried them by the cabin and lived there, mourning. He never came back, so it had to be him in the ground.

The thought of losing him terrified me. So when I actually woke up one day four years ago and found him gone without explanation, I went right in to work and took a piece of custard pie from the freezer and ate the whole thing in about three bites. Thompson saw me stealing it too, but he didn't mention it when he called me into his office and pinned me against the wall with his chubby weight and stuck his tongue in my mouth. I'd expected him to make a move for some time, so it didn't frighten me.

He'd showed up in the pantry one day when I was bending to pick up a can of pumpkin mix from the bottom shelf. A week later I went to find some peaches and found all the pie ingredients had been moved to the top shelf where I'd have to stretch to get

them. He constantly came in when I was in there. Sometimes he spoke to me about the recipes I was using, and sometimes he just watched with a half grin smudged into his face, thinking a dirty thought or two.

Once Thompson gave me the weekend off and I decided to spend my time looking for Bobby. He hadn't been to my apartment since that morning he'd disappeared and I had to know where he'd disappeared to. I was sick without my dreams and him in them. I went to the Mediterranean restaurant where he would eat his lunch of fried chick peas and pita and green tea, but didn't see him there. Then I rode my bike down to the library and thought I saw him in the periodicals, but it was another muscular boy with long brown hair and corduroy pants.

I brought my bike home and sat on the porch with iced tea and thought long and hard about what had happened between us and I couldn't fathom why Bobby wouldn't have wanted to spend his nights in my arms, because the dark is what makes us what we are and the daytime doesn't matter to us. Bobby wasn't a gas station worker or a high school student, he was mine. And I wasn't the pie girl, I was his girl and that's what made us complete.

I went down the street to a bar and bought myself a tall, skinny glass of beer and drank a few sips and tried to calm down. A boy came over to me and talked a fancy game about saving nature but I didn't like his sweater vest or the paunch over his belt so he bought me a drink and quickly left. It grew dark outside and the bartenders switched shifts. Therese came in. She was an older girl I used to party with and she fed me a couple of drinks on the house and gave me a little device to play trivia games with but I

didn't know anything about sports and was drunk and got frustrated quickly. When I gave the machine back to her I saw Bobby come in from the patio. He was wearing khaki pants and a black striped button up shirt and his hair was cut short and spiky with highlights, but it was him. A dark haired girl was with him. She was wearing black stretchy pants and a little leather backpack. I didn't want to talk to him while she was around, but he came over anyway with a big grin on his face and the girl followed.

"Deborah," he said. "Deborah. Deborah. *Duhdahduh*."

"My name's Veronica," the girl said. She stepped up with her hand hanging in front of my face, like she wanted me to kiss it.

I whirled out of my seat onto the floor and looked up at him. My eyes glassed over. "Bobby," I slurred. "You've broken us. You've *really* broken us." I cupped my hand over my mouth and stumbled out of the bar. *Duhdahduh*, I heard him yell behind me. *Duhdahduh*.

I ran home and climbed the narrow stairs and opened the door and heard the sound of hooting in my apartment. The Yummy Bakery owner had told me once about cracks in the attic windows. Owls would get in there to make nests and eat mice. Sometimes, if they were brave, they would try to get into other places too, like my apartment. I'd never seen one or heard one there before, so I'd forgotten about it. But that night when I was so angry at the most beautiful man I'd held, I heard the sound of an owl in the attic above my head. I grabbed a broom from the closet and pushed it over me, pounding on the ceiling.

"Just leave me alone," I screamed and swung at the walls. "Let my heart rest."

I put the custard in the fridge and punch out, knowing Thompson isn't there to call me into his office and reprimand me or assault me. I go out into the alley and find Alana smoking a cigarette by the dumpster. She's talking on her cell phone with tears in her eyes. When she hangs up I walk over to her.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Thompson called me this morning and asked if I wanted to go to lunch. I said I'd let him know later and then called my boyfriend Henry and he said he heard a rumor that Thompson sleeps with the girls he hires." She wipes her eyes. "And now he doesn't want me working anymore."

She looks so much like me at her age. I think about her in the pantry with Thompson sniffing after her. Or her in his office on top of his desk, his hands clawing at her shirt and his gut unraveling as his pants came off. I don't know who Henry is, but if I were him and she were Bobby, I wouldn't let her go through with the sadness of Thompson's Cafeteria.

"Go home," I say. "You don't need this."

When I wake from that final dream, Bobby is already awake. He's found the mice in the traps and has disposed of them, then goes running on the trails in the woods. I find him stretching on the floor of the cabin. I stay in the cot, watch him move his hands to his toes, and talk about my dream. He's dreamt differently. "We made a tree house in the woods," he says, "like the Robinsons, and had children, miniature versions of ourselves

with all our best attributes. Most importantly,” Bobby says, “they had your light hair and lime green eyes.”

“But your muscles,” I say, “did they have them?”

“Maybe tonight,” he says and crawls into the cot next to me and falls asleep with his head resting on my chest.

But I can’t sleep anymore, so I go outside and sit on the log bench and try to see the clouds up close, like Bobby said. The headache starts, but I want to see how close we are to heaven. The clouds are so low I can taste them if I can just stick my tongue out. The pain starts in my stomach, deeply, but I reach out and feel the vapor in the stratus and bring my hand to my mouth and suck the droplets. My ears pound and I hear Bobby cry from the door of the cabin, but before I can react I’m doubled over in the grass and he holds me with those tender hands and I cry.

“You were standing on the bench,” he says quietly, rocking me. “One foot balanced on the edge, the other looking for ground but not finding it. One hand in the air, the other in your mouth, and when you heard my voice you toppled over.”

I believe him. Bobby has a way of making me crazy like that. He takes me places I’ve never been to, like the hills that are a fifteen minute drive from our town, and rents a cabin just for the two of us to sprawl out naked in. My parents never loved me enough to make my life any kind of adventure like he has.

Even though Bobby and I are out in the open air with the clouds above us, it makes me claustrophobic. Like my own small life has been torn open by this boy and anything is possible as long as he is with me.

CLYDE, THE BEAR

Clyde carried his hammer like it was a weapon. He hoisted it high and kept it there while we walked through the field at the back of his family's property. The ground was flat, but the field had filled with weeds and stray withered crops. I moved the wheelbarrow over and around large protruding stones, listening to Clyde talk about his plans for the homeless man who had moved into the storage shed by the old water pump.

"First we'll tell him to get out," he said. "And if he doesn't get running, I'll hit him in the knees with this hammer."

My dad called it a claw hammer. It had a flat front and two metal teeth on the back. It looked menacing, even though it was a tool for building things. Clyde knew this, which is why he always carried it around.

I wanted to tell Clyde that the homeless man wasn't any of his business. I wanted to remind him that even though he weighed two-hundred-and-fifty-pounds he was only fourteen-years-old. He should let his dad take care of it.

"Yeah," I said. "Then I'll kick him." I looked across the field. Because the day was waning, we could already see the small fire he'd built outside the shed. The smoke was strong and black against the horizon, though small and controlled. There was care in that fire, I could tell. I was a Boy Scout. It wouldn't surprise me if he'd strung up a clothing line running from the tree to the shed. He'd probably installed a wash basin under the pump. A little rack on the wall for his tools. A space for his hatchet, his own hammer, a small pellet gun to hunt hare. I liked the idea of the homeless man making the

shed his own, all of his items organized with the same concern my father uses to clean and store his guns.

“He’s probably drunk,” Clyde said.

“He is homeless,” I responded.

“So.” Clyde turned an irritated eye toward me.

“I’m not defending him.” I said. “I’m just saying. I’d be drunk if I didn’t have anywhere to live.”

“Shut up. Look.” He pointed toward the shack.

The man stepped out of the makeshift cabin with a metal plate in his hand. With a stick he stirred the white coals of the fire, bringing out the red glow, and then set the plate on embers near the edge. We were close enough now that he could see us if we moved too much, so we crouched behind one of the large rocks Clyde’s dad never cleared from the field. I struggled with the wheelbarrow, pushed it up against the rock and it made a scraping sound. Clyde smacked me with his large forearm. He did this frequently, since he’d learned his size made him intimidating, and often laughable, and it always left bruises, which to him was the same as winning some sort of prize.

“You dumb ass,” he whispered. “That homeless guy’s going to hear you and then come out here and stab you with his knife.”

I stretched my head around the corner. The man didn’t even look up. He was sitting on a rock, sipping something out of a tin can. Clyde grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back.

“He must be drinking some sort of moonshine. When we’re done with him, we’ll take it from him,” Clyde said. He poked at his hand with the hammer’s claw. “I haven’t been drunk in a while.” He flipped it over, rubbed the head with his thumb.

“You ever hit anyone with that before?” I asked.

“I’ll hit you with it if you don’t shut up.”

I did, because I believed him.

“We’ll wait here,” Clyde said, “until it gets dark.”

We leaned against the rock and didn’t say much of anything to each other. Mostly, I thought about the homeless man. I had questions for him. I wanted to know what had made him homeless, if he had a family, if he had gone to school. From what I could tell, the man didn’t look any different from my father. We were still a ways off from him, but I could tell he was of average height and had a beard. I peeked around the rock again and saw him washing his plate under the water pump. He seemed comfortable, wiping it with a little towel. The modest shed had become his home. The fire pit and water pump his kitchen.

I sat on my hands and listened. The crickets were starting their nightly song. Clyde breathed heavy into his chest. If he sat with his legs up too high, too close to his chin, his breath would come heavy and thick, like a bad smoker’s cough, like you could hear the dark from inside him trying to get out. I wondered if living here, on this dying earth, was the cause of his trouble.

Clyde’s father’s farm wasn’t good for crops. The soil was spoiled with rocks and buried tree roots. The one time I’d seen Clyde’s dad on a tractor, it was broken down in

the middle of the field. He had tied his wife's horses to the front end, was whipping them, trying to pull it back to the barn. It wasn't moving. He was too lazy and broken to hand plow. The man always complained of back pain or knee pain. He didn't know that, to make a farm work, you had to fight through broken and missing fingers, swollen ankles and fevers. The next day, Clyde showed up to school with black busted lips and dark, swollen eyes. He never frowned, though. Home life had washed the emotion from his face.

"You okay, Clyde?" I asked him.

He let his legs down. "Shut up," he said. "I'm fine."

"What am I doing with this wheelbarrow?"

He punched me in the arm, leaving a red mark. "In case we need it," he said.

"For what?"

He punched me again, this time on the thigh. The hot pain shot up my side. I grabbed my leg with one hand and smacked Clyde on the face with the other. He saw a tear run down my cheek and laughed.

"You're an asshole," I said.

His face got red. He swung out fast, snatching my hands in his.

"You touch me again and I'll kill you," he said.

To make a point, he took both of my wrists in one of his hands and picked up the hammer with the other. It hovered over my knees for a moment. He saw me watching the head of the hammer as it wavered inches above my kneecaps. The black metal was cold as he rubbed it on my skin. A chuckle came from his throat as it moved around my

crotch. Finally, he pushed it into my stomach, hard. I held firm, kept my sniffles to myself, trying to breathe easy.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “I’ve killed rabbits before.”

He was still holding my arms above my head. I let my eyes scan the distance. I was wishing my father would come along. He didn’t know where I was, though. Clyde’s parents didn’t give a shit about him, so they sure weren’t coming. At some point, it had gotten dark, and all of the corn stalks and strands of hay and dwarf sunflowers had faded into the black sheet background. It was just Clyde and me against the rock with a wheelbarrow and a hammer. He dropped my arms and lightly smacked my face.

“I killed a cat once, too,” he said. “It was my sister’s. A real little, real pretty gray cat with a tail that looked like it’d been dipped in chocolate.”

He held up the hammer, swung it slowly forward. “Used this,” he said. He rolled it in his hand, watching the head turn. In front of him, in the dirt, was a dark brown puffball mushroom. His eyes focused on it. The head of the hammer came down swift, exact, and a rancid yellow-gray cloud emerged.

I wiped my nose with my hand. It was sweaty and coated in dirt, but I didn’t like the feeling of snot running. It was embarrassing. The mushroom’s cloud hovered for a moment before falling back to earth, spreading the seeds.

A few hours had passed before I saw the column of white smoke pour out from the fire pit. Clyde had fallen asleep with his fat fingers curled around the handle of his hammer, the head resting in the pit of his neck. He was wheezing in his sleep, but I didn’t want to wake him and get fresh bruises.

I stood up and looked for the homeless man. Across the expansive darkness, it was harder to make out the shack or any movement around it. I took small steps, inching my way around to the front of the rock to see if I could get a better view. A small rabbit darted in front of me, its feet silent on the ground, careful, only kicking up dust. My eyes began to adjust and I was able to make out shapes in the moonlight. The brown rectangular structure in the distance came into view, along with small trees lining the road behind it, and the craggy ring of the fire pit in front of it. I crept forward, opening and closing my mouth silently, rehearsing what I would say to the homeless man. *I'm sorry, I'd say. I'm sorry you couldn't find work, or money. I'm sorry your wife didn't love you and kicked you out. I'm sorry you're living in a small shack behind a forgotten field.* Mostly, I was sorry to have been helping a fat animal killer like Clyde. *You need to leave the only home you have, I'd say. Now.*

Another rabbit dashed in front of me, bending to the right and diving behind the rock. A pang of metal against stone sounded, and then a cough, followed by Clyde clearing a wall of mucous from his throat. He came around the rock and spat on the ground. In the moonlight he looked like a small bear breaking out of hibernation. I slumped down among the weeds, attempting to avoid his gaze. His eyes were roving, not quite focusing yet. I tried to watch him, but could only see small blades of grass and clods of dirt. Clyde moved and the crickets stopped their song. I rolled to my right and caught his gaze. He stared at me, one hand on his wide hips, the other wrapped around the hammer.

“Henry,” he yelled. “If you don’t come back here, I’ll kill you.”

Clyde kneeled, fingered the soil, and picked up a rock the size of a golf ball. He held it in his hand, contemplating the weight. He stood, shifting his feet, trying to find good grounding for a throw. The pitch itself was something spectacular. He heaved his arm, rotating it like a train wheel speeding down a mountain. His body wasn't used to the momentum, and the unbalancing caused his legs to collapse upon themselves. His hands dug into the dirt, bracing him from complete collapse. The flight of the rock arched like a dirty rainbow. I was scared, and slowly snaked my hands over my head, bracing for the impending impact. The rock landed a few yards to the right of me, in a bush, kicking up a few hares that scattered. Clyde had never been an athlete, so I wasn't sure if he hadn't been able to see me, or if the throw was merely off.

I waited. Didn't even take my hands from my head. Clyde stirred in the distance; his breathing sounded difficult. I saw him squatting next to the rock, trying to catch his breath. For a moment, I thought about running home to my father. It was a few miles off, though, and I'd have to explain what I'd been doing out in that field in the middle of the night with that troubled fat kid, a hammer, and a wagon. I didn't even have the answers myself.

Clyde stood and raised his hammer. His large head turned, scanning the ground. That's when I realized in this light, with my brown hair and khaki shorts, he couldn't tell me from the dirt.

"Henry," he said. "I've got all night to wait. You can either come back and we can finish what we came to do, or I can wait until the sun comes up and kill you, too." He took his hammer and smacked it against the rock, watching for the impact. A pang rang

out. He smacked it again, still watching. He was like a pyromaniac with a fire, or a teenage boy with a naked girl (not that I have much experience with one). That's when I realized the hammer was the only thing he had control over. His metabolism had failed him before he was born. His mother was the beaten wife of an alcoholic. This realization did nothing for me, because I was terrified of the small bear lurking by the rock.

A loud creak poured over the field. It took me a moment to distinguish the sound from Clyde's abuse of the rock. I looked behind me and saw movement by the shack. The homeless man had stepped out. He lit a cigarette, which I could discern because of the many times my father had stepped onto our porch at night and rolled his own cigarettes, or smoked his pipe. He'd lick the cigarettes before lighting them. I always thought that was funny.

The homeless man stood still. Clyde must have noticed him, because things grew quiet. Clyde shuffled behind the rock. It was a mysterious nighttime standoff, the two of them waiting for something to happen. Myself in the middle, tired and dirty, frustrated. I considered the consequence of running into Clyde's heavy, violent arms. There was little chance he'd actually kill me by bashing my brains the way he did those poor rabbits and his sister's unfortunate cat. He'd certainly make me regret leaving him, though. The homeless man moved slowly, cautiously, his cigarette dancing by the shack, like my father's pipe on our porch. I sprang up and ran.

Clyde was able to see me then. He scrambled around the rock, shouting my name. "Henry," he said. "Henry. You retarded piece of shit."

I kept an eye on him as I ran. Clyde moved fast for himself, but slow compared to me. All those days I spent hiking to the creek, chasing the dogs around my mother's garden, and walking to the school house and back, had given me lean legs good for running. I moved swiftly, hurdling rocks and plants. Looking back, I saw Clyde had only gotten to where I had been lying in the dirt. I looked forward and saw a pair of dirty legs. Then the homeless man lifted and threw me into the extinguished fire pit, singeing my bare arms and the parts of my stomach where my shirt had lifted. I screamed, scratched for cold ground to raise myself from the coals. I rolled out of the fire pit quickly and stood, looking for the homeless man. He was pacing in the field, smoking his cigarette and kicking rocks. Clyde had gone missing, was probably back behind his rock, reciting fantasies to his hammer.

I wanted to run by my skin felt like it was on fire. I went to the pump and ran water over arms. I splashed some on my stomach too. The homeless man came back, grabbed me by the hair and pushed me up against the chipped paint lining the side of the shack, keeping his grip on my head.

"Some kids, nosy enough, don't come back from night time adventures." He spoke slowly, words getting caught in his beard. "They're lucky to just have scars."

I kept quiet, like I had with Clyde. The man smelled like a hodgepodge of rabbit stew and saddle soap.

"This your folks' farm?" he asked me, letting go of my hair, moving his grip to my shoulder. He patted around my waist and over my pockets, probably checking for weapons or something to steal.

“No, sir,” I said. “It’s my friend’s place.”

He took a second to light another cigarette, pulling it from behind his ear, the matches from his pocket. He looked out at the large rock and struck the match, holding it to the tobacco and inhaling.

“Where’s your friend?”

“Not sure,” I lied.

“Behind the rock. Seems to have breathing problems.” He smacked me on the side of the head. “Don’t care for liars much. Listen.”

My breathing halted. The crickets were still chirping, but behind that, there was a wheeze drifting through the air. Flakes of paint from the shed fell from the side of my face. I brushed a few more from my hair.

“All this dust, it’s bad for the lungs,” he said. He waved his cigarette around, like he was conducting his thoughts. “Had my own farm, before the rain stopped and the ground scorched and cracked.” He released my shoulder and kneeled down, poking his finger into some dirt. “Busted my ankle one day in the summer walking through a field. I was hunting fowl - chicken, pheasant, blackbird, anything – and went to step over this small mound. The wind had moved a lot of soil, so I didn’t think anything of it. When I went to scale it, my foot fell through and twisted. Turned out it was an air pocket in the soil, baked in, like a hole in a loaf of bread.” He touched his boot. “Still limp a little bit.”

“Is that how you became homeless?” I asked.

“You can’t make nothing when God doesn’t give it to you.” He took a drag on his cigarette and stared at his ankle. I inched back, moving away from him. His hand latched onto my pant leg.

“When there’s enough light I can see you walking away, you can leave. The last thing I need is to worry about a dumb kid hauling ass through my front yard. Next time, I just might gut you.”

He moved the coals around again, this time digging, extracting deep red gems to start the kindling I gathered from behind the shed. The man watched me the whole time, saying he wanted to make sure I didn’t take off for home. I think he was worried about his safety. There were enough big sticks and rocks around it’d be easy to injure a guy his size. He never checked to see if I was carrying a knife, or a small gun. He hadn’t mentioned relatives or friends. It was possible, at his station in life, that everyone was the enemy.

I handed him a small pile of wood and he nodded. He placed it on the fire, carefully balancing the sticks on top of each other to make a complex pattern of air channels. Sparks flickered as the glow moved through the wood. From behind the rock I heard Clyde wheezing, but didn’t want to go back to him. It would be trouble, and I’m guessing the man thought the same, because he didn’t mention anything about the sound, just raised his head when Clyde’s breathing got to sounding particularly loud.

“Clyde needs a doctor,” I said.

“So do I,” he said. “Bad back. Bad neck. Bad knees. Bad ankle. Bad lungs, too.”

“I’m sorry you lost your farm.”

“No you’re not,” he said. “If your folks lose their home, then you’ll care.”

There was a crunch and I looked up to see Clyde standing in front of the fire. He was squinting at us, holding his hammer tightly. He must have been moving real slow for both of us not to notice.

“You two look comfortable,” he said.

“The boy here is just waiting the night out so he can head home in the morning, when there’s light,” the man said.

Not being ready to talk, I was glad the man spoke for me. It seemed to disorient Clyde, who leaned back on his feet like he wasn’t sure what to do. He twirled the hammer in his hand, looked at it.

“That’s my Dad’s shack you’re sleeping in,” Clyde said. “This is his fire pit. The water you were washing your plate in, it came from his well.”

“I’ll be on my way in the morning. No use moving now when it’s dark,” the man said. He was calm. I could tell he’d been in situations like this before.

Clyde started to move around the fire. “Shut up,” he said. He kicked some dirt on the fire. The flames died briefly, but shot back up. “You can leave now. No need to pack your stuff.”

The man looked at me, then up at Clyde. “Fine,” he said. “I just need my coat.” He stood and walked to the shack, opened the door and went inside. Clyde followed him, keeping watch. When the man returned, he had a coat on and a brown fedora in his hand. “It was nice meeting you,” he said. He turned to leave, but Clyde stood in his way.

“I’ll kill you if you come back,” Clyde said. He poked the claw end of the hammer into the man’s chest for effect. I didn’t want the man to go.

The man nodded and pushed past Clyde who followed him toward the rock we’d been hiding behind. They got a dozen yards out when I saw Clyde raise the hammer and hit the homeless man in the back. When he lifted the hammer again to strike him in the head, the blow never connected. The man spun around, catching Clyde in the face with his fist and knocking the boy to the ground. He placed one foot on Clyde’s heaving chest, his good foot, and leaned into it. The wheezing started, and then the large boy’s arms whipped at the man’s legs. He didn’t let him up, and the heavy, congested breath came out in gasps. The strength slowly drifted out of Clyde’s arms and into the rocky soil.

I watched from the fire. Something inside me wanted to get out. The man walked around Clyde’s large frame and picked up the hammer, placing it in the boy’s pocket. He lit a cigarette and seemed to contemplate the situation.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

He ashed onto the ground. “Probably,” he said. “How’re you getting him home?”

I thought about the wheelbarrow. Clyde had planned on killing the man and bringing him back as a trophy. Now it looked like I’d be bringing his own lifeless, or semi-lifeless, corpse back home. I wanted to run, but he spoke first.

“The boy looks like a bear,” he said.

I pushed the wheelbarrow around to him. The homeless man helped me lift him up. It took several minutes for us to maneuver him in, and several more for me to find the perfect balance and keep the wheelbarrow upright. The homeless man walked back past

the fire and into the shed to get his things. I struggled, but managed to get Clyde over to the fire where I sat. The homeless man reemerged with a stuffed backpack. He reached into Clyde's pockets and found a few broken cigars, a pocketknife, and some bubblegum. He placed those into the pockets of his own pants, tipped his hat, and maneuvered past the fire pit and through the grassy weeds and brown stalks of the unkempt field, stopping once to pat the large rock the small bear had emerged from.

SCALING THE LADDER

She barely pulled the shirt over my head and the belt from my pants before shoving me against the grating bark of a maple tree. To my right, the lake had no inhabitants and the cool water forced a mist in the air. To my left, the parking lot was almost empty, and the few cars parked on the premises were partially obscured by tree branches. Underneath me, ants crawled next to one of my socks. At this point, I was the only naked inhabitant of the forest, save for two squirrels chasing each other along branches.

The act we performed was rough. Things weren't blissful, as I always felt it should be, but Stella's body felt good against mine. We heaved against the grain and our feet curled over leaves and small green needles. A small nibble on my ankle sparked my interest. "Is that you?" I asked.

"Not just yet," she responded.

I looked down and saw a sea of white spread out before us. A beastly swan had its beak latched to my ankle. Around us were hundreds of others, swarming. I don't know if it was the smell or something carnal that attracted them, but they were there, and my skin erupted in miniature chilling mounds.

I pushed Stella off of me and leapt over the feathers, dashing toward the car. My keys were trapped in my pants, still visible beneath a pocket of swans. She stared back, quacking birds around her, annoyed. "Something wonderful was happening," she yelled.

“And you had to dash off in the middle of it.” She bent over to pick up my pants. “Take the keys,” she said and tossed them toward me. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The sheets were being ruffled that evening. Stella, unable to get comfortable, spent much of the night turning, fluffing her down pillow, flapping at the blankets, and quacking in her sleep. I pretended to doze, but opened my eyes occasionally to stare at her. She was beautiful, even when she was irritable. I grabbed her hand and placed it to my chest. She stopped moving, promptly straddled my legs, and placed an index finger on my nose.

“Chadwick,” she said. “There’s something I’m not happy about.”

My eyes found her finger on my nose, and then promptly found her breasts, then her face. “Continue,” I said.

The bed rattled with her back hitting the mattress. A small feather from her pillow floated to my stomach. “I’m bored,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

Then she smacked the side of my head, lightly. “I’m glad we straightened that out. Now what are we going to do about it?”

Something possessed me in the morning. I tore from the shower in the nude, wrapped my waist in an apron, and proceeded to fry bacon and eggs. I had milk and orange juice on the table before Stella rose and came into the kitchen, finding me sitting down reading the paper. “Bacon. Eggs. A little bit of juice,” I said.

“Are you naked?” she asked with a grin. She placed her toes between my legs.

“Yes,” I confirmed, “I am naked. I hope you don’t mind your eggs scrambled.” I flipped through the paper to find anything of interest.

She clawed it out of my hands. Her eyes inflated. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I replied. “I’m merely taking the situation into my own hands.”

“I don’t want it in your hands,” she said. “This thing – this thing you’re trying to do right now, it doesn’t work for me.”

I could suddenly feel my skin under the rough apron. I’d tried to open myself up that morning, but had apparently failed.

“I need something different,” she said.

The eggs were cold and could have been warmed up, but Stella tossed them to the floor anyway. The bacon mingled with the eggs. I grabbed the milk and orange juice before they fell as well. My imagination captured Stella grabbing my shoulders and throwing me to the table, making angry love in the middle of a bombed out kitchen. The reality involved a pen and paper, after a quick jaunt to the bedroom for clothes.

“Here we are,” she said, drawing a ladder on the page. Two stick figures were placed near the bottom rung. “Here’s where we should be,” she continued, placing a star at the top rung.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s the ladder of kink, and I want us to climb it.” She took my hand. Things were suddenly more sincere. “You need to do something about this.”

I looked at the paper for a moment. “What happens if I’m not comfortable climbing the ladder of kink?”

Her gaze shifted from the table to the sink, and then slowly toward the door. “I’ll have to make some tough decisions,” she whispered. “It’s about my happiness, Chad. I’m uncomfortable with our abnormally normal sex life.”

“How much time do I have?”

“That’s up to you,” she said. “If you’re trying, I might give you an extension. I can’t wait forever, though.” My hands tightened up underneath my sleeves. “Loosen up and have some fun, buddy,” she said.

“Will do,” I said. I didn’t believe myself, but thought it was worth the effort to save a mostly happy marriage.

Kinky ideas began to clasp themselves onto my brain like a pair of fuzzy handcuffs. I thought back to the men’s magazines I’d read in my fitness years. In the back of each issue was an article on sexual positions or ways to satisfy a lover in the bedroom. They’d always accompany pictures of skinny women with push-up bras and flawless tans, puckering their lips for the camera or wagging a finger in the reader’s direction. I hadn’t thought them important at the time, but now I wished they weren’t turning back into earth at the bottom of a rubbish pile.

I tapped my pen twice, thought for a moment, and wrote a numbered list on the back of the paper.

I came home from work early that night. Stella had dinner ready and was lighting candles when I walked into the kitchen. “Steak,” she said. “And coconut shrimp.”

"Sounds like a delight," I said.

My hands did nothing to hide the awkward weight of the air. An entire roll was buttered and in my mouth before she attempted to pour the wine. "What are you nervous about?"

The fridge held onto my list, displaying it for the audience of us. "You set the ground rules, honey," she pointed out.

I nodded.

"I merely had editorial control over the way scenarios will play out." She reached behind herself and grabbed the list off the fridge. She also pulled a pair of reading glasses from her pocket. "Easy kink," she read. "I take it this means to do something normal, in a unique or kinky way?"

I stared back. My silence was acknowledgement.

"I have the solution," she said. "Eat your dinner. You'll need your energy."

I downed three glasses of wine out of nervousness. Was I supposed to shower beforehand? Or would that untie the bond of kink? I imagined myself as one of the stick figures, jaggedly drawn and facing the bottom rung of a rickety ladder. Stella would be staring down from the greatest height, clutching the handle and waving her three fingered hand proudly. I wanted to vomit.

I had barely touched the steak when she grabbed my hand from across the table. "Chadwick, whatever happens, I will still respect you. This is about me, not you." I smiled back and thought about the many times we'd made love over the last decade. We

knew our bodies like we knew the taste of coffee. I wondered if, of the many times we'd been naked together, she'd ever been happy.

Everything was amplified in this moment. Her chair scooted across the floor and I heard the clap of her shoes. Suddenly I felt her lips on my neck. She unlashed my tie. I stood and followed her to the bedroom.

Things began as usual. I undressed and she watched. Then she undressed and I watched. My back hit the mattress, as usual, and she climbed on top of me. "This isn't so bad," I happily said.

She touched my chest and smiled. "Can I call you kitten?"

I forced a smile.

We were halfway through the act when I noticed something animalistic occurring. My chest was bleeding. Roars poured from her mouth. I halted, gathering her attention.

"I forgot something," she said.

"What?"

"Here." She pulled a mask from behind her back. It was orange with black stripes and had long whiskers protruding from the face. "You wear this," she said, stroking the whiskers.

"What do you have to wear?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"That doesn't seem fair."

"Oh, all right," she said and pulled a zebra mask from underneath the mattress. "I was going to surprise you." She pushed the mask over my face. "Now slay me, tiger."

The next day I felt defeated. We'd finished the ritual a number of times over and my arms were bruised, my chest reddened, and my ego blackened. Stella left for work around eight-o'clock. I stayed in bed resting my soul.

Breakfast for one was made at nine. The bath was filled at ten. I didn't come out until nearly noon, and then I slept some more.

Stella was wearing a plaid skirt when she came home from work. Her high heels clicked on the floor and her shirt was open around the neck. I was wearing a pair of torn jeans and a loose sweater. I'd spent most of the day in bed, and had only gotten dressed a few hours prior to her arrival. "Did you get home early?" she asked.

I smiled, acknowledging her words. "I've been working fast," I said. "Plus, I'm excited to try exercise two tonight."

She beamed and then kissed my cheek. "Get in the car," she said. I did.

Stella drove me to Martha's Corner, a popular location in our suburb. She pulled the car behind Ten Pin Bowling and climbed into the back seat. "If we do this quickly, we won't get caught."

The sun was on its descent, but not quite as far along as I would've liked for a situation like this. Friends from work generally met at Ten Pin on Tuesday league night. When I was in my twenties, we would often get drunk and throw bottles behind the alley to disrupt the quiet nature of the town. One night Brendan, a buddy from college, slipped on some broken glass by the dumpster and lost an eye. Since then, police would cruise past this area, and they'd gotten real defensive about any unruly behavior.

“Come on,” she urged. “If we get caught, it’s your fault.” I slipped over the front seat and into the back. I started to take my shirt off but she stopped me. “Chad, we don’t have time for that.” She reached to manipulate the latch on my belt. Leaning in for a kiss, I was firmly denied. “No offense, but this isn’t about love.” I stalled at those words, but she kept going.

Her legs climbed onto mine. The sun was going down and I found myself looking out the windows for an audience. People meandered, seeming to not notice. My interest was overshadowed by fear. I reached under her shirt and was once again denied. “You’re distracting me,” she said.

“That was nice,” she said. Two minutes of silence passed as her breath slowed.

“What did you mean when you said this wasn’t about love?” I asked.

She looked me over while she gathered her hair. “You’re not going girly on me, are you?”

Before I could answer, a flashlight shone into the window.

“What’re you kids up to?” an officer asked. I checked to make sure that everything was in place before rolling down the backseat window.

Stella, her face red from the activity, jumped into action. She choked up, tears squeezed from her eyes. “I’m sorry, officer,” she sobbed. “We were just having a talk about our marriage.”

I nodded, wishing we had been.

“Why didn’t you just have the talk at home?” he asked.

“Too many bad memories haunt that place,” she said. “Also, the kids are there.” He took that answer as genuine and recommended counseling to us. We were directed to go home or go to a bar. We went home, but not to bed. She called her mother and I took a shower.

The next night I found myself stalking our hallways. Pictures of our relatives seemed like bedsores on the walls. My brother, Vinny, sent us pictures of his kid every Christmas. We’d lined them up, creating a timeline of Carla’s growth. Aunt Christine had her last child at forty-eight. The other twelve had been captured on my grandfather’s dusty Kodak.

It seemed mocking at times, since we didn’t have any children of our own, and I’d discussed it with Stella on a number of occasions in the past. “We’re professionals,” she’d argued. “We don’t have children, we have jobs.” I sighed and hung up the phone, placed the remainder of dinner in the fridge.

This evening Stella had insisted we dine at a hip bakery and sandwich joint down the street from Martha’s Corner. We met separately, both traveling from late nights at work. Kelly, a strange but lovely girl from Stella’s past, was working the night shift, baking goods for the morning’s rush, and let us stay after the rest of the customers had been forced out.

We sat in a corner, listening to Kelly’s glazing and dusting of bread loaves in the back. “Chadwick,” she began.

I stopped her. “Why don’t you use the word ‘honey’ when speaking to me? Or ‘baby’? Or ‘love’?” I asked.

“Because your name is Chad,” she responded. “I hate terms of endearment.” She turned toward her turkey sandwich. “Tonight’s adventure is a little different.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“It’s similar to last night’s, only someone is going to know it’s happening.”

I sipped my coffee and listened to the rest of the explanation. Not much was heard. “Finish your drink,” she finally said, “things will get cold.”

I found myself locked in the walk-in freezer of the restaurant. I was cold, and my pants were around my ankles. Our breath was clearly visible against the stacks of frozen dough that surrounded us. Every two minutes Kelly was reminding us how much time we had left before her boss would be stopping by.

Upon entering the freezer we were given twenty minutes. Five of this was taken up by my questions. “Have people done this before?” I asked.

She responded with a question. “You’ve never had to work the night shift at a restaurant, have you?”

I shook my head.

She explained. “Half the staff gets high back here. The other half fucks back here. When you work a shitty job like this you have to have some vice.”

“Which vice do you have?” I asked.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes,” she warned.

We hopped through the door like two kids breaking for the playground. Things had hardly begun when Kelly knocked on the door again. “Five minutes,” she screamed.

Stella's hand grazed my hair, "I'm almost there," she said. Something about the situation seemed completely wrong. The cold and the constant warnings from Kelly kept my mind wandering to a number of thoughts. Why did it have to be cold? Why couldn't we be warm underneath our sheets in a comfortable bed? The hard dough was digging into my back and I felt sympathy for the customers a few days off. The strange lighting kept Stella's face contorting into something that wasn't her. The dark corners of her features were turning light and back again. She wasn't my wife and I wasn't her husband. We were random people having sex in the back freezer of a bagel joint and that was it. I might as well have been high while it was going on.

"How do you know Kelly?" I asked, rolling over in bed, still shivering from the encounter at the bakery.

"We were friends in high-school," she said, choking back laughs before continuing the story. "We used to spend the night at each other's houses, sleeping in the same bed, the way girls do, and eventually it just led to other things. She was my first serious partner. She knows me better than anyone because, even while I was dating guys, I'd still find myself calling her up on weekend nights when I was alone. Sometimes I'd find myself crawling back into her bed. That stopped a number of years back, but damn, do I miss her sometimes." She sighed the last part. I almost expected to see a flame meet a cigarette.

The next night I came home to find three plates out for dinner. The pasta was already served. Foccacia, salad, and oil were set between the plates. Two bottles of wine were sitting on the table, and three candles were lit. I heard laughing from the bedroom,

but decided against walking into the commotion. I took a seat at the table and poured myself a glass of wine.

A few minutes later, after I'd nearly finished my glass, Stella and Kelly came down the hall, giggling to themselves. They were wearing matching thin red dresses that accentuated their features. I'd noticed that Kelly was lovely, but didn't realize how remarkable her figure was. Stella was, of course, still striking, but was also familiar.

They took their seats at the table and looked at me. Stella was the first to say anything. "Chadwick, I'd like you to meet Kelly." She took Kelly's hand and raised it, as if she was pointing out a new classmate.

Despite my knowledge of Kelly's identity, I nodded.

"Hello," Kelly said, keeping up the awkward tempo.

"Kelly will be joining us this evening. I hope you don't mind." Stella winked at me from across the table, as if I needed assurance of the upcoming activities.

Without saying anything I poked at my food.

"Doesn't that sound lovely, Chad?"

"Sounds wonderful," I said. Then I heard the toilet flush, and a man with a beastly mane and arms as thick as my chest walked into the room.

Somewhere between finishing my first glass of wine and finishing the bottle, I'd become drunk. I found myself staring at Kelly in wonder. Asking her questions about which movies she loved, what songs made her want to die, and how she felt about kids. While asking these questions I'd lean in closely, searching for traces of her perfume over the thick Italian scents pouring off the table. I kept trying to forget the brute I'd learned

was named Samson, but he wasn't letting me. His musk cologne was interfering with my quest to identify Kelly's perfume. This strong and composed voice smacked the silence like a hammer. "The last time Kelly and I swapped was with the Martuccis."

I choked back a glare. It was apparent he was trying to make us comfortable by opening up the conversation. I preferred the alcohol to do it for him.

"It was only a few months back, the last time. We find it helps the relationship actually." He pushed a few golden strands from his cheek and filled his glass. "Everyone gets frustrated after a few years. Same situations over and over."

Kelly leaned back and dabbed at her lips. Her hands fell to her lap and she glanced about the table.

He continued. "I suggested it two years ago, and we've never been happier." They smiled at one another. He devoured her hand with his. I wasn't sure what was supposed to occur, but Stella seemed pleased as she ogled Samson's shoulder blades.

Samson turned to me and smiled. "So this is your first time swapping?"

Stella's face turned down, the lips curling into a guilty grin.

"Isn't it your first time, honey?" I asked.

She blushed.

"Do you want to use the animal masks?" I asked, looking back and forth from Stella to Kelly and then letting my eyes quickly drift over Samson.

"There's only two," Stella pointed out. "That would be weird."

"I thought that was the point," I said.

“Shut up,” she ordered. Forks dropped to the plates. Glasses clapped against the wood of the table. Samson giggled a bit under his breath.

My face was red, but I decided to move things forward. “Tell me how this works,” I said.

Stella stood up to take charge. Her dress was falling off of her shoulder, partially exposing her left breast. Samson caught this detail and his head began to move with his eyes. My feet tapped anxiously.

“I’ve been planning this test for months,” she began. “If you can pass this one, our relationship will survive with no problems.” I looked over at Kelly and smiled. She smiled back. Samson encouragingly clapped my shoulder with his enormous hand.

“This is difficult kink, Chadwick,” she said. “I made up the spare bed in the second bedroom. And, as a special treat for you, if you go along with this, we can revisit those conversations from a few years ago.” She sat back down, fixed her dress, and poured another glass. I could tell she was happy with herself, but she didn’t seem to be registering the weight of everything she said.

Our hallway photographs passed through my brain almost every day. At this moment, in a slurred state, they were gliding through quite slowly. Stella had just let me know that she would consider having children if I were to sleep with a friend of hers, and, in turn, allow her to spend the night with her friend’s significant other. This was more than a question of judgment, this was a deliberation of our relationship’s value. Was I willing to prostitute myself, and my wife, in order to realize my dream of having children? Was it worth staining our bed sheets with another person’s sweat?

My glass was tipped for the last time that evening. Her foot moved under the table, rubbing against mine. “You can do this, Chad,” she said. “For me.” I placed my glass on the table and looked at Kelly. She was beautiful, especially in the confidence that kept her from getting caught in the awkwardness of the situation.

Samson finished a second serving of pasta and placed his fork on the table. His features grew more repulsive as alcohol took effect. Stella grabbed his hand and Kelly took mine. We stood together and walked slowly down the hallway toward the bedrooms. I let my eyes pause over the photographs of Carla. To bring something like her into the world would make me complete. Right now, I wanted nothing more than that. Her tiny body was growing into a small person and every time I passed her picture I prayed her parents were raising her correctly.

Our feet slowed at the end of the hallway. The bedrooms were across from one another and Kelly stopped in front of me, Samson in front of Stella. I wasn’t shaking prior to this moment because the alcohol had slowed my blood, but I was truly beginning to panic. I didn’t know how to love the woman in front of me and wasn’t sure if I would be able to. My hand smacked my leg in tiny convulsions. Nobody seemed to notice.

Kelly picked my hand up and looked me in the eyes. “Are you sure you’re ready to go through with this?” she asked.

I nodded, only to find her placing my hand in Samson’s. He looked down at me from his broad shoulders. “Do you want me to hold the door open for you?” he asked. My brain slowly registered what was happening. Across from Samson and me, Stella and Kelly were already worked into an embrace. My shoulders were turning warm from

Samson's thick hands working them. My vision began to bend, and, after a moment of consideration, I collapsed and threw up on his shoes.

That evening, after cleaning myself up, I called a cab. Stella and Kelly went to the back porch and smoked a joint, giggling to one another in the dark. Samson attempted to help me gather my things, slyly hinting I should stay over the course of my bag being packed. I wasn't relenting, however, and his shoulder massages were kept to a minimum.

I didn't bother to say goodbye to Stella or Kelly that evening. Once in the cab I headed straight for the Holiday Inn at Martha's Corner. I'd spent the night there in the past, on occasions when Stella and I couldn't keep our anger restrained. She always got the house.

The next morning I had plans to call up Vinny and see how Carla was doing. After that, I'd take my time bathing and head over to their place just in time for lunch. Around four Carla would be making it home from third grade and I'd get to see how well adjusted she was compared to the rest of my world. Maybe, in the evening, we'd step into the bowling alley and roll a few games. I'd have the attendant find a light ball and set up the bumpers for Carla. Anything to make it easier on her.

Stella had been living in the closet for most of our marriage. Toward the beginning, I'd tolerated her hints at opening things up and exploring a bit. I never expected them to be as imposing as they were. Her boundaries were large like the space between us on that imaginary ladder hanging from our fridge. By standing near the bottom rung, looking up at her graceful three fingered hand waving back, I was remaining grounded, and completely aware of what I wanted out of this world.

A WOMAN'S LAWN

Mitchell found the lock on the tool shed rusted. He tried forcing the key through, but it wouldn't fit anymore. He couldn't help but consider the irony of his tools, ones that could help him cut the lock off or oil it until it was usable again, were organized and hanging not more than a foot beyond the door.

He glanced back at the yard, the grass rising above his waist and dangling seed from its spears, and took his hand from the lock. It had been two months since he last cut it - possibly four. He couldn't recall. Whichever month it had been, Lynette had died then.

The particulars surrounding Lynette's death didn't resonate with Mitchell as much as their lack of preparedness. The events, which were many and complex, required foresight neither of them had had. Mitchell needed to make funeral arrangements based on assumptions. Did Lynette want an open casket or closed? Soft music or an up-tempo celebratory song? (She was supposedly going to a better place, after all.) Which creditors did he need to contact? Which remaining family member should he tell first? He hadn't been sure of any of these things, and their affairs, his affairs, invariably fell into disarray, until Robert arrived.

Mitchell woke one afternoon to find Robert in the kitchen.

Robert looked into the living room where blankets spilled from the couch to the floor. "You've changed beds," Robert said. Two coffee cups were set on the table, a bowl of sugar beside them.

“I must have forgotten to lock the door,” Mitchell said and sat across from his son. He picked up his coffee and sipped it. It wasn’t warm anymore, but his stomach ached for anything.

Robert squinted at his father, and Mitchell knew why. He looked like he hadn’t bathed in some time.

“Dad,” he said. “I want to show you something.” Robert took his father’s arm and led him to the front door. They stepped onto the porch and looked out over the swaying stalks. “This is unlike you,” he said. “You like mowing your lawn.”

Mitchell looked at the yard. He reached over the porch railing and grabbed a fistful of grass. His son was right. He’d never let it get this bad before.

Robert placed a hand on his father’s shoulder. “If you want, I can take a day off -”

“Not necessary,” Mitchell said. “My hands haven’t died.”

“I can bring over the kids and we can make lunch. Maybe grill steaks when it’s all over,” Robert persisted.

A door opened across the street and an elderly woman looked out. Robert waved back, but Mitchell couldn’t take his eyes off the lawn.

“If it gets much worse, field mice will be the least of your problems,” Robert said.

Mitchell didn’t laugh. “I said I’ll take care of it.”

The growth of the lawn perplexed Mitchell the most. As had Lynette’s death. He tried to think how his neighbors had followed the happening surrounding his home. They probably noticed the lawn first. The sound of his mower no longer entered their homes on Saturday mornings. Children had probably tripped over the extending edges of his lawn.

He hadn't used any tools since Lynette passed. She'd liked the lawn neat and orderly - leaves between bushes were to be removed within a day of their falling.

Mitchell would dress in overalls and boots, knee guards and gloves, and methodically rake and mulch. He kept the lines in the yard straight while Lynette sat in her rocking chair on the porch, glass of iced tea in her hand, voicing her observations. "Mitchell," she'd begin. "Don't edge too far in or you'll make it look sloppy." And inevitably he'd shut the edger off and step back to look. She was right. She was always right.

Robert patted him on the back. "Let me know if you need any help." He said. "I love you, Dad."

Mitchell nodded. "Drive safely," he said.

Mitchell started his work inside the house. He took his trash to the curb. He folded the grass down with his feet before he could lay the bags on top of it.

Lynette had never allowed him to wash the dishes. He called Robert to learn how to run the dishwasher. He squeezed cups in where he could and loaded the top rack down with silverware. He laid on the couch at night and listened to metal clanging about the machine's innards.

In the morning Mitchell walked across the street to Emmett's house. They'd played dominos before Lynette passed away. Now they rarely spoke to one another, and Helen, Emmett's wife, watched television with the sound on so loud Mitchell could hear it from the street.

Emmett answered the door in his boxer shorts. "You're still kicking," he said.

Mitchell nodded. "I was wondering if I could look at your tools."

"Course you can," he said. "Give me a moment."

Mitchell stood in front of the garage door and watched it slide up and in.

Emmett's tools were displayed along the right wall of the garage, shiny and well oiled.

Mitchell knew good craftsmanship, the type you find at Sears. He knew that Emmett recognized it too.

"I'm just looking for a bolt cutter," Mitchell said. "I've got a rusty lock that needs taking care of." Emmett walked to a spot near the garage door and pulled a pair off the wall.

"These should do you," he said.

They walked onto Emmett's lawn and looked across the road at Mitchell's.

Mitchell felt the spongy, well-manicured grass beneath his deck shoes. He liked the bounce it put in his step. His own lawn rose like a plume from the ground.

"You've got to get that taken care of," Emmett said.

"I know," Mitchell replied.

"That lawn will bury you if you don't."

Mitchell clipped the lock on the door to his shed, opened it and looked in. His meticulously organized tools had developed a dusty film. On the wall were his rakes, shovels, and brooms. A weed whacker was propped up in one corner. In another was his leaf blower.

At a cabinet in the back he found what he was looking for. It was important, he thought, that his hands be close to the earth for this job. Holding the small sickle, he moved his arm in a half circle. It felt good to work his muscles.

At the corner of his driveway he grabbed a bushel of grass. He reached real low to get close to the dirt. Swinging the sickle was effortless. The blade was still sharp and the grass came away smoothly. Mitchell smiled and went inside his house to change

He came back to the yard wearing his overalls and boots. His knee guards were on and he had a large fishing hat to keep the sun off his neck. He stooped at the spot he had cut earlier and continued to work at it. Surprised at the ease, he moved quickly, tossing the grass stalks behind him onto the driveway.

When he stopped to survey his progress, there was a three-foot spread in the lawn. Looking closely, he noticed that small weeds were sprouting up amongst the grass. His lawn needed a chemical treatment. Mitchell went back at it. His next swing never completed, though, as the point of the sickle struck something wooden and hollow.

Placing the tool behind him, Mitchell stepped to the spot where contact was made. Sticking out of the ground was a brown, weather-worn jewelry box. A small lock kept the lid on tight. He carried it into the shed and searched for a screwdriver. When he found one small enough, he pushed it into the keyhole and twisted until he heard a snap. The lid popped open. Inside on green velvet lining was a familiar necklace- a gold chain with a locket. The locket was decorated with an ivory inset and two pearls secured on each side of it.

He flipped open the locket and saw a picture of himself as a wiry, smiling teenager. It was the necklace she'd been buried with. He looked at the jewelry box. That had been Lynette's too, he was sure. Someone must have stolen her jewelry box from their bedroom after stealing the necklace off her corpse, he thought.

Mitchell dialed Robert's home. "Someone's playing a mean joke," he said.

Robert breathed heavily into the receiver. "It must be a different necklace because nobody would do that."

Mitchell thought about it. His memory had been pretty lousy lately. "I'm not sure," he said. All he remembered was the ebb and flow of people, coming and going for days.

The next morning he dressed for yard work and went out. He'd been afraid the jewelry box would disappear if he left it out of sight, so he took it with him, onto the porch. The necklace he kept in his chest pocket.

Starting where he left off, he moved further down, along the sidewalk. He'd cleaned the blade the night before, so it still moved swiftly, cutting through the grass. He followed the squares of the sidewalk, taking each foot-and-a-half seriously. He made the grass even, baled the stalks once the piles on the driveway got too high. Blisters formed on his hands, reminding him that his calluses left when he wasn't working. Mitchell enjoyed being in the sun, and at the end of the day he looked at his lawn and could see a resemblance of what it had been in the strip he'd cleared of excess.

Emmett came by for his bolt cutters. Mitchell was kneeling in the lawn, gripping a bundle of grass in one hand and wiping the sickle on his leg with the other.

“You know, Mitchell, you’d be done by now if you just plugged a weed whacker into that outlet on your porch.”

Mitchell’s eyes passed to the porch, then back to Emmett. “I know that,” he said. “This time, I prefer to get my hands dirty.”

“You always were a stubborn one,” Emmett said. This confused Mitchell. While he’d always done things the way they needed to be done, they were never *his* way. When he’d hung the chandelier above the dining room table, it was his wife who insisted that he hang it low. The candelabra no longer fit on the table, but it wasn’t his decision.

Mitchell brought Emmett his bolt cutters and tipped his hat. “I appreciate it,” he said.

Half the lawn was finished when Mitchell found the bicycle seven sidewalk squares from the driveway. It was a pink John Deere woman’s bike. Five speeds with a banana seat. They didn’t make them anymore, but he found one lying on its side in the grass. He narrowly missed it with the blade, only stopping when he heard the flapping of the spokes turning. There was a Pete Rose baseball card clipped to the tire with a clothespin.

He lifted the bike and was surprised to find it was still in good condition, not like the musty jewelry box he’d uncovered a few days prior. There was no rust on the hardware and the tires had plenty of air. He rolled it to the driveway to get a closer look. It was familiar, but he wasn’t sure from where. On the side of the seat he found writing that read *To Lynne, with love*. Again he called Robert, and explained the situation.

“Dad,” Robert said. “I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I’m a little worried about you.”

“It’s pink. Pink with a Pete Rose card in the wheel,” Mitchell said.

“White banana seat?”

“I think so.” He looked out the window, to where it sat on the porch. “Yes.”

“I think you’re confused, Dad. Mom used to have a bike just like that.”

Mitchell went to the bookshelves and found the old photo albums. He’d recognized the bike, but never placed it. One picture showed Lynette’s whole family, all twenty-five of them, piled around her father’s Lincoln. He used to joke that with the trunk space, he could fit the whole lot of them in the car.

In the pictures Lynette was a beauty, and her poses suggested knowledge of this. In almost every picture her legs were stretched long and thin, her arms akimbo, neck held high. Her whole family did this. They dressed well, had lovely long fingers, and, because of her father’s influence, drove fancy cars. Mitchell thought they might have been going to church after the photo, but the date on the back said it was a Saturday in March. The time said it was taken in the early evening.

On Saturdays, while Mitchell was mowing his lawn, Lynette’s father would be across town, waxing his car in the driveway.

He found a picture of Lynette with the bike. She had the same haircut as in the picture with her family, but she was wearing pink hot pants to match the bicycle. She was in the driveway, happily posing with it. She gripped the rubber handlebars and looked to the side like she spotted somewhere to go. Her legs looked good too, he thought.

But his examination of the picture left him just as curious as the arrival of the bicycle. He needed the connections between the present and the past to be made for him. He placed the bike in his kitchen and found an aging cigar in a box in his cabinet. He sat on his front porch and puffed thick clouds of smoke while watching the remainder of his work turn about in the warm wind. Somewhere down the street loud music played.

In the morning sounds of percolation echoed from the kitchen to the rest of the house, followed by the tepid aroma of coffee. Mitchell woke on the couch soaked with sweat. The sun had risen before he had, warming the house while he slept.

Outside a rustling came from the yard. Mitchell stepped to the window and found the grass had grown in the evening. It swayed with no indication of cause, prompting him to dress and get back to work.

He started with the riding mower to quickly halt the creeping growth. When he'd completed the task, he grabbed the sickle and twine.

At the far end of the grass, by the porch, between the bushes, he saw the twitching stalks of grass, but had no indication of what it was. He knew, however, that it was important to reclaim his lawn before tackling the invasive element. It had to be done on his territory. The phone rang, but he ignored it. He grabbed a handful of grass and swung, tossed it back, and repeated.

He could see the moving stalks of grass, like a trapped beast was on its back below them, shaking for help. Beneath the rustling grass was a moan, low and grumbling, the kind animals are said to make when they converse and don't want men to hear.

He was two sidewalk squares away from the rustling when he stopped. Looking up he saw Emmett standing over him.

“You’re making progress,” Emmett said.

Mitchell looked at Emmett and saw his wrinkles. He wasn’t the same man he remembered from the ’60s, smoking Lucky Strikes and building furniture in his driveway. These days he wore corduroy slippers and rarely put pants on.

“I’ve been missing things,” Mitchell said. “And I don’t even know what they are.”

“Me, too,” Emmett said.

Mitchell thought about fighting through the moving grass to see what injured beast lay below the swaying stalks. Staring out the kitchen window he saw the seeded tops urgently moving back and forth in the dark. The phone rang and he answered it.

“Dad,” Robert said. “Did you try to call me this morning?”

“I’ve been working in the yard all day. I haven’t had time to call anyone.”

“I’m pretty sure it was your voice on the line –”

“I said it wasn’t me.” Mitchell tapped the counter. He thought about hanging up.

“Regardless, Stephanie’s pregnant again.”

Mitchell laid the phone down slowly, went to the living room and sat upright in the recliner. His toes passed over the shag carpeting. He went to the end table and reached below it, pulling out his slippers. He took them to the kitchen where he sat down in another chair and put them on. The phone rang, but he ignored it and opened a drawer

next to the sink. He grabbed a flashlight and tested it. The phone rang again as he went outside.

In the shed he picked the sickle up and wiped the blade on his shorts. He started toward the lawn and flipped the flashlight on. He hacked at the grass, ignoring the even and skilled work he had done prior. The stalks were taller than he was now. The seeds had grown to the size of grapes.

He left the debris behind him, on the lawn, and moved forward. Around him the neighborhood was mostly dark. The only house with a light on was Emmett's, and when Mitchell stood, he could see Emmett's silhouette in the window. He turned back to the grass.

The stars came out when he reached the bushes. He could still hear the ringing of the phone, but it was being drowned out by the animal moans. He sized up the grass growing between the bushes. The swaying stopped, aware of his presence. He shone his flashlight through the bottom of it, illuminating a pristine adult woman's hand.

He cut around the hand carefully. The nails had been carefully manicured, the wedding band polished and gleaming. He cleared the grass off its fingers. When the hand was free, he saw an aged and worn silver bracelet clasping to its wrist. He gripped the wrist and pulled. The fingers bound themselves to his wrist, but the arm wouldn't budge.

He picked up the flashlight and went to the shed where he withdrew a pair of gardening shears from a drawer and grabbed them. He headed back to the grass and found the hand balled into a fist. Mitchell cut further around it, cleared the arm up to the

elbow. When it could move, it grabbed Mitchell's shirt and pulled him closer. He heard the moan and continued to cut.

A few more minutes and he'd cleared it up to the shoulder where he saw the lacy edges of a wedding dress, still white, despite being buried under an ocean of grass. He started cutting downward and uncovered the side, which still wore the dress. Eventually, he came down to the legs which had on white hosiery. The feet wore blue pumps.

He cut around the legs and cut the grass from the body. The veil over the face was dark, and above it was a tiara which looked familiar. Lynette had worn a similar crown at his wedding. It had been her aunt Meredith's. He remembered the veil Lynette had bought-her own touch.

He cut around the rest of the head. He was nervous about pulling back the veil, scared of what he would find. He moved to the other side of the body, cutting out the arm and side. Afterward, he stepped back and picked up the flashlight. The bride in front of him was still, aside from breathing. He saw the chest rise and fall, but the sounds she made were the same low moans.

Mitchell kneeled in front of her, steadied his breathing. He gripped the veil with both hands and lifted it. He'd exposed Lynette's youthful mouth, nose, and eventually, her eyes, which blinked rapidly in the light.

She opened her mouth. It was filled with grass. He reached in, pulled the green from inside her. She smiled and put her arms around him, pulling him back to her.

He had her on the porch. She was in her wedding dress, a blanket wrapped around her, and a glass of iced tea in her hand, rocking in her chair. She had the veil in her lap. Mitchell was standing next to her. He gripped her shoulder, holding, waiting for her to speak.

Lynette's eyes stared at the yard, the large patch of still swaying stalks seemed mocking to her. She turned her eyes on him, drank some of her tea, and frowned.

"When are you going to finish cleaning up the yard?" she asked.

Mitchell took his hands from her shoulders. He stuffed them in his pockets. "I'll finish it when I get to it," he said and smiled. She was real.

She emptied her glass into a bush next to the porch. "This tea doesn't taste good," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Do you want more sugar?"

"It's that lemon you put into everything." She wagged her finger at him. "No lemon next time."

He stepped back. "I can do that," he said.

"I'm cold." She stood, held the blanket around her, and walked toward the door. Her foot kicked the jewelry box. "What is this?" She bent and picked up the box. Mitchell smiled at this. It was like giving her a present for a second time.

"You've let my jewelry box get ruined." She opened it and looked at the necklace, flipping open the locket. "Oh, yes," she smiled. "That wonderful necklace."

"With my picture," Mitchell said.

“Yes,” she said. She closed the locket. “Your picture. Well, it would be best to get my stuff in the house.”

Mitchell opened the door and led her inside. He placed his sickle on the counter and went to the sink to wash his hands.

“What is that smell?” she asked.

Mitchell thought he’d gotten rid of the stench and sniffed the air. He grabbed a towel and dried his fingers. “I don’t smell anything,” he said.

“You really should start taking care of this place.” She looked around the room, finally settling on her bicycle by the door. “Were you going to get rid of my bike?” she asked.

“Lord, no. I just found it in the yard.”

She placed her hands on her hips and glowered at him.

“I swear,” he said. His eyes watered. Mitchell was bewildered.

She held the look until he turned around to hang up the towel. She sat in a chair and took off her pumps, then placed them beneath her chair.

“Would you like to go to bed?” he asked. His voice was soft. “The bedroom is the same as you left it.”

“Mitchell, I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” she said. “Why don’t you take the couch tonight?” She didn’t look his way. Her gaze was kept on the hallway, leading to their bedroom.

She was already awake when he woke the next morning. He heard her clanging about the kitchen. When he walked through the doorway he saw she had every dish out of

the cupboard and on the table. She was organizing them into the dishwasher. She must not have been able to find her own clothes, as she was dressed in his jeans and a t-shirt. Mitchell couldn't remember what had happened to her clothes. He just knew they were gone.

"I opened the cupboard and saw all the cups were filthy. Who taught you to load a dishwasher?"

Mitchell stared back.

"I'd offer you a cup of coffee," she said. "But I drank the last of what I made. You can make more if you like."

He sat at the table and picked up a fork. With it he circled his hand, searching for a soft spot. When he decided on one, underneath the fingernail, he took one of the fork's teeth and pushed hard enough to break the skin.

"Shit," he said.

Lynette plunged a knife into the utensil caddy on the bottom row. She turned to see what he was doing.

"You're going to get an infection doing that." She turned back to the dishes. "What happened to my clothes, by the way? I'm gone for a few months and you just get rid of me?"

Lynette was on the porch and Mitchell was in the kitchen. He had the phone to his ear, pretending to dial. He wanted to dial for real, but was afraid she'd hear. Lynette started rocking and the creaking of wood on wood began. Mitchell punched in Robert's number.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” Robert said when he picked up.

“Son – I…”

“Some of the most important news of my life, and you hang up on me.”

Lynette’s rocking slowed, then picked up pace again. Mitchell saw her through the window. She was scowling at the grass.

“I think I’m going crazy,” Mitchell said.

Robert paused. “I’ve been trying to tell you that for months. You need help.”

“Can you come over?” Mitchell asked. “It’s very, very important.”

“I really don’t want to, Dad.”

“What can I do to get you to come over and speak with me in person?”

The creaking stopped.

“You can let me bring my family.”

“Sure. Sure,” he said and slipped the phone back onto its cradle.

In the evening Mitchell argued with Lynette. They sat on the couch Mitchell had been using for a bed.

“I don’t know where I came from,” she said. “I’m not ready to see people.”

Mitchell placed his head in his hands. “I don’t understand,” he said. “You’ve got your youth back.”

She raised a foot and pulled the leg of Mitchell’s jeans back to touch her skin. It was firm. She smiled.

“That’s true,” she said. “Still –.”

“They’ll think I’m crazy. I don’t want to be crazy.” He stood and walked to the kitchen, slammed the doors of some cupboards. He looked at her bicycle by the door. He brought his foot up to kick it, but thought better of it. He came back to the living room and stood in front of her. His eyes were wet. “I don’t want to be crazy,” he said.

“How do you think I feel?” Lynette said. She looked up at him.

“You have a point,” he said. “This must be strange for you too.”

Mitchell reached to a lamp on the table and flipped it off. It was dark in the room. His hand found hers and they sat together, silent and warm in their company. After a few minutes, Lynette rose and wiped her hand on her pant leg.

“I’m going to my room now,” she said.

“That sounds fine,” he said. “Just fine.”

In the morning Mitchell heard the doorbell. It buzzed and he rolled over. He was in his boxers. It buzzed again and he stood. The door opened and he heard voices. There were two kids yelling, one boy and a girl, and there was also the sound of a man and woman. He tried to place them, but Robert walked in the room.

“It’s noon,” Robert said. “You asked me to come over so I did.”

Mitchell grabbed his pants from the floor and put them on. Stephanie came in the room and said hello.

“It’s good to see you again,” Mitchell said.

“Always so formal,” Stephanie said. “It’s good to see you, too. Did Robert tell you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, good then.” Stephanie looked back at the kitchen. “I’ll start getting lunch together.”

“Good,” Mitchell said. “I need to speak with Robert.”

She left the room and Mitchell and Robert were alone.

“I need to show you something,” Mitchell said.

“If it’s the lawn, I’ve seen it.” Robert said. “It’s not your best work, but it’s a start.”

“No. No,” Mitchell said and grabbed Robert’s shoulder. “In the bedroom.”

Robert walked to the hallway and flipped the light on. Stephanie’s cooking could be heard in the kitchen. The children were at the table, talking about cartoon characters. Mitchell followed Robert down the hall to the bedroom door. Robert reached for the handle and twisted. It didn’t move.

“What’s wrong?” Mitchell asked.

“Door’s locked from the inside.”

Robert went to the hall closet and grabbed a wire coat hanger. He twisted the top until it was straight and pushed it into the hole in the door handle until he heard a click. Then he opened the door and they both walked in.

A small pile of clothes were folded on the bed, but other than that, the room was uninhabited. Mitchell went to the closet and opened the door. That, too, was empty.

“Where did the wedding dress go?” Mitchell asked.

“Whose wedding dress?” Robert asked.

Mitchell thought about what he was saying. “Do you remember the bike I told you about on the phone?”

Robert nodded and folded his arms.

“Come with me,” Mitchell said.

He gripped Robert’s arm and led him through the hall to the kitchen. The kids were still at the table, and Stephanie was leaning over the stove, dropping spices into a pot. Mitchell went to the door.

“The bike was here,” he said. He looked through tears at Robert, then Stephanie. The kids were eyeing him strangely. He remembered he didn’t have a shirt on. Robert walked to him and pushed him through the door.

“Dad,” he said. “What the hell is going on with you?”

“I don’t know,” Mitchell said. He repeated the words. “I don’t know.”

Robert wanted his father to rest, but Mitchell couldn’t. The next day Mitchell would be picked up and taken to a hospital to see his doctor, but he would be allowed to go home afterward. Robert promised him that much.

In the late evening, Mitchell was in the yard again, digging a hole. He wanted it six feet deep and three feet wide. Mitchell noticed it had only been a few days and the grass was almost up to the top of his boots. He thought this was good.

Quietly, Emmett approached Mitchell and stood behind him, watching him dig. The hole was in the center of the yard and Emmett noticed it was roughly in the shape of

a coffin. Mitchell stopped, leaned over the shovel, and breathed deeply. He turned and looked out of the hole at Emmett.

“Your grass has a mind of its own,” Emmett said. “I’ve been watching it. Every hour it grows.”

“It has been acting funny lately,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell picked up the shovel and tapped at the blade with his foot.

He slid the blade into the soil. “I just want to start digging early, because it’s not worth sticking it out for the long haul.”

Emmett jumped back as Mitchell spooned soil onto his bare feet.

A bicycle bell rang. They both turned to see Lynette pull into the driveway on her bicycle, wearing her wedding dress and pumps. “It still works,” she said with a smile. She dragged the bicycle past the porch and into the kitchen.

Emmett rubbed his eyes. “Is that-?” he said.

“If you can see her, we might both be senile,” Mitchell said. “Give me a few minutes so I can talk to my dead wife.”

They were sitting at the kitchen table, no drinks in front of them, staring intently at one another. Mitchell cleared his throat.

“We can’t live like this.”

Lynette folded her arms, leaned back. “I didn’t dig myself up, Mitchell. When you went out to that yard and started cutting the grass, the blade was in your hand.”

Mitchell put his face on the table.

“Everything’s been so wrong since you died. I’m not able to think correctly anymore. That poor neighbor of ours. What’s his name?”

“Emmett,” she said.

“Emmett. He might as well be dead. He stopped living long ago.”

“It’s what you make of it,” Lynette said.

“What if you can’t make anything of it anymore?”

“It’s something we’ve all got to weigh. You think I didn’t have a choice?”

Mitchell was tired. He stretched his skinny arms. The room was quiet. Lynette, in her startling youth, was contemplative, observing him.

“Were you ready to go?” Mitchell asked her.

“I thought I was,” she said. “But you needed me.”

It was still dark when Emmett picked up the shovel. Lynette was standing next to him. She lit a cigarette. “Got my youth back. Guess I got my lungs back too,” she said. She pointed at the shovel. Emmett pushed some earth into the hole. Some pebbles trickled onto Mitchell’s head.

“Make it quick,” Mitchell said. “I don’t want to fight it.”

“You won’t,” Lynette said. Specks of green appeared on Mitchell’s skin. They burst outward. Emmett continued to spoon the dirt, filling in the space around Mitchell’s body.

Mitchell hugged himself. He felt the confines of the earth surrounding him and enjoyed the cold. This was finality. Alone, in the ground, at night, with a neighbor pouring earth over your eyes, giving you one last opportunity to bond with your lawn.

Grass erupted from his mouth. It pushed forth from his eyes. Lynette stepped over him and dropped the necklace onto his chest.

THE STORY OF JACOB

Marcia was delivered to our neighborhood in a Winnebago. It was early, on a summer Saturday, and I was in the kitchen preparing for the next morning's Mass. When I looked through the shaded window I saw the vanilla camper parked next door, her legs climbing out of the side door. She turned gracefully to the driver, shouting something. To this day I'm unsure of what it was, but it caused the driver to reach out and drop a leather backpack at her feet. The camper sputtered out of the cul de sac, leaving her alone on the sun bleached sidewalk. She leaned over, hoisted her bag onto her shoulder, and walked up the driveway to Mrs. Taylor's house. I went back to organizing sheet music: opening procession, Eucharist, prayer, closing procession. When I finished I placed them in my guitar case, just as I'd done each Saturday for the last two months.

That afternoon there was a splash. I saw Marcia swimming in Mrs. Taylor's pool. She had particularly good form, like she'd been in the water all her life. I practiced scales while watching her glide and turn. When she climbed out to lay on the poolside chair, I took a camera from my desk drawer and snapped a picture. No flash, just natural lighting draping across her copper skin. Blond hair bunched up beneath her head. Small, red, two piece bathing suit. Blue water calm beside her. Bare and tan stomach. Long and thin arched legs. Gray concrete. Any boy would have taken it. But from my bedroom's height she was the size of a minnow, and I needed to fully capture the moment.

The grass was soft as I stepped along the edge of the wooden fence dividing our property. Searching between the boards, I found the section nearest Marcia's spot and

crouched. During my trek to the fence she'd removed the ties to her top. One string dangled below the edge of the lounge and swayed in the breeze. A gust of wind came along and must have woken her. For one brief moment she rolled over, leaving her top on the towel and giving me cause to take another picture. Then she reached for a t-shirt and pulled it over her head.

I fanned the Polaroids and watched them develop. The first I found innocent. But the second felt dangerous. Both went into a drawer where they stayed. I returned to working my fingers up and down the neck of my guitar. Marcia fell asleep for some time and then woke to roll over. She slept some more. Had my mother not announced dinner, I would have watched into the evening. Marcia was better than cable television.

"That girl Marcia," Mom said. "She's a slut. Jan says so." I quietly nibbled at my chicken leg. Being a slut only made her more interesting. "Rahab. Magdalene. Marcia. They're all easy." Mom gulped her wine and moved her green beans into her potatoes.

Apparently Marcia was biblically slutty.

"Down in San Francisco they're all sleeping together. That's where she's been. Three years paying rent on her back. Drugs too."

It was all foreign. San Francisco was a crater on Mars. A distant fornicator's paradise. "What kind of drugs?" I asked.

"Does it matter? Drugs are drugs." She dabbed her lips with a napkin and squinted at me. "Jacob. Father Darling said you seemed tired yesterday."

"I *am* getting up at five for the early service."

"You're young. You've got energy."

Mom ignored the fact that I was the only teenager at St. Mary's before seven on a daily basis. Being fourteen, I possessed energy adults no longer had. It also meant I had to ride my bike there and back with a guitar strapped to my shoulder.

After dinner we washed the dishes together and sat down to watch television. Mom put her arm around me and began running her hand through my hair. This happened often. While a part of me found it relaxing, even pleasant at times, I never allowed it to go on for more than a few minutes. I excused myself for a glass of water. Rather than returning to the TV room, I went to bed.

But the weather worked against sleep. We lived in Ashland, Ohio. During the summer evenings a pleasant moist breeze settled over the town. Marcia was already taking advantage of this: her feet dipped in the pool; tank top on; a plastic cup in one hand, cigarette in the other. At least I thought it was a cigarette. I'd never smoked anything. I sat on the window ledge sixteen feet above her and strummed my nylon acoustic, considering how best to approach her.

The last pretty girl I'd talked to was at my father's funeral. I was standing at the coffin trying not to look when cousin Ellen stood next to me, put a warm hand over mine, and curved her lips to the side. Instant romance. I spent the rest of the weekend nervously shadowing her, but the hand holding never repeated itself and she kept asking what grade I was in.

Marcia was not family, though, and aside from living in Ashland there was no tragedy to link us, so I watched. When she went inside the pool house for bed, I went to sleep, too.

A purple light waxed the horizon when I heard a car idling next door. I looked out and saw a young shirtless man in the driver's seat of a convertible. Secular rock music drifted from his speakers. Across the lawn a hinge creaked. Marcia held both hands to the door as she slowly pressed it closed. Her blond hair bounced as she walked across the concrete surrounding the pool and toward the wooden gate.

The man leaned over and opened the passenger door. Marcia ran from the fence, jumped into the seat, and brought his face to hers. For a moment they sat like that, joined at the face, until his hand reached up under her shirt. She jerked away. The car's engine ignited, pulling them from the driveway and sending them down the road. Something grew hot in me. It welled in my stomach and drove out through my mouth. "Damn," I said.

The glass I'd drank from the night before met my hand and I thought about throwing it through the open window. It could tumble and fall, exploding on Mrs. Taylor's driveway. But I couldn't reel my arm back.

I dropped the glass in a trashcan, and when I didn't hear a satisfying crash I drove my foot into the plastic until it buckled and shards tinkled and scraped against each other. Mom must have heard because I heard her walking up the stairs. I dove under the blankets and thought about what Father Darling would say if he'd seen my display of weakness. Mom opened the door.

"Did you hear something?" she asked. But I stayed quiet until the door clasped.

The next morning Mrs. Taylor was standing on her porch sipping coffee as I rode my bike down the driveway and onto Jefferson Street. The moon rested in the sky while I

pedaled and coasted my way to St. Mary's. Mine was the only bike on the property that morning, as it had been many mornings.

The entire church was tired. Mrs. Taylor rested her eyes in the third pew on the right side of the church. When they opened they were aimed toward me. The small number of parishioners was noticeable when they lined up for the Eucharist. Mrs. Taylor didn't even join them, instead choosing to sit silently at her seat.

Soft voices echoed in the hollow white room as they sang joylessly and marched forward to receive His body and blood. I played guitar as they walked, tapping my foot to keep the tempo going and keep them moving. At the key change the wide front doors of the church opened letting in a breeze. Marcia stumbled through. She held onto pews as she walked up the side aisle. She looked tired. Her face was red and wet.

When she found her mother, she slid in beside her. "Why'd you lock me out?" she said, loud enough to hear over my guitar.

"I didn't lock you out," Mrs. Taylor said. "You were gone and I locked up."

The parishioners tried not to stare as they filed through the line and back to their seats, hands still cupped together. Marcia cried in her seat. Her mother looked around, an embarrassed look on her face. Finally, Father Darling approached the altar as if nothing was happening. He asked us to pray, spoke loudly, offering us peace, offering thanks to the Lord. While we prayed, Marcia slipped into the aisle and fled the room. It wasn't until after the closing procession that I saw her again.

I stepped through the side door and found Mrs. Taylor smoking on the stairs. Without looking, she held the pack out to me. I closed my hand over them and pushed them back to her.

“Thanks anyway,” I said. “But my lungs are a gift, and I must care for them.”

“I was about your age when I started,” she said. Her eyes were tense. Her hand tight as it held the cigarette.

“Marcia came to church,” I said.

“In a way, yes, she did come. Not like it was her choice.”

There was silence between us so I dug my hands into my pockets and looked over the parking lot. Marcia was sulking in the front seat of her mother's blue minivan. Even weathered and angry she was radiant.

“Any idea what to do about that one?” Mrs. Taylor said.

“If she'd be interested, I could use a female voice for a new song,” I said, though I had no song written. Nothing to add a feminine vocal touch to.

“I'll run it past her,” she said and stubbed her smoke out. “Maybe it'll be a positive step.”

I took Mrs. Taylor's hand as she walked down the stairs. “May I suggest it?” I said. We stepped onto the asphalt and approached the van.

“It's your act.” She opened the door.

Marcia turned to us. “Kid from next door,” she said. “It's too early to chat.”

“Manners,” Mrs. Taylor said.

“It's fine,” I said. “I was wondering if you would consider singing for me.” But Marcia closed her eyes and sighed. Mrs. Taylor sat down and started the engine.

“I'll try to convince her,” she said. “She needs to show an interest in something.”

Watching the two of them ride out of the parking lot, trapped together inside that little van, inspired me. Over the next three hours a melody slowly unraveled in my heart, and then I put pen to paper. A melodic line at first. A few words. The inclusion of a counter melody. By nine o'clock I'd completed a verse and the chorus. His hand guided mine through the creative process. The words written were truly Divine. I looked outside my window and saw the pool house light on. I wrote faster until I had a rough frame. The beginning of an important musical work that could change someone's life. I hoped it would be Marcia's.

With the guitar case strapped to my back I crawled over the wooden fence into her yard. A pleasant piano melody was playing inside and I yearned to be in there with her listening to that music. I hesitated. Raised a hand to the door but couldn't connect. It didn't matter. The door opened anyway. It was Marcia, beautiful and drunk, leaning against the door jamb.

“You don't climb too well,” she said. And she was right. I'd nearly fallen off the fence on my back. It could have destroyed my guitar.

“I've come to show you something,” I said.

She moved aside and I stepped into the dim living space. The pool house was a large room with an adjoining bathroom and mini kitchen. Each corner was stuffed with clothes. Each surface littered with food packaging. I wondered for a moment if this is

how twenty-somethings lived, with markings of their lives spilling across rooms, no noticeable method to their existence.

“Sit down,” she said. “You’re making me nervous, staring at my shit like that.”

I suddenly felt guilty for being curious. “I wanted to show you something,” I said.

She took the notebook from me and grinned at the gold music staff embossing the cover. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Just read,” I said. She opened it and her eyes drifted through the pages. When I saw she was concentrating, I tuned my guitar. Then I started into the chord progression. Gentle and quiet at first. Then a crescendo. She lit a cigarette and continued to read as she smoked. But a tiny thing happened. It told me God was at work in that room on that awkward summer night. Though I made no suggestion, Marcia began to sing. And then He gave her the gift of understanding.

She belted the words to me: “Like a harlot, rising from her bed on a work day. Like a junkie returning poison to the well of a syringe.”

I held back rising tears. Never had I heard something so beautiful. I repeated the final verse and chorus before ending the song. She looked at me, a tear welling up in the corner of her eye, and said “Jacob, I have to sing this song in mass next week. It’s better than the best confession.”

“Of course,” I said. “It was written about you.”

She wiped her eyes with her hands and stared at the page. "I didn't think anyone understood what I've been through. Not even my mother." Then she put the book down. "But you knew the exact words I needed to hear."

"And you knew how to sing them."

Saturday night she came to my door and asked me over. When we began practicing, I discovered she'd memorized the words to my song. Her mother had also approved of our musical commiseration.

"She likes that I'm doing something positive for a change," Marcia said. She sipped her beer and swayed with the music. And then she touched me. I realize now that it wasn't an erotic touch. Her hand brushing through my hair was more of a friendly gesture, but at the time I was desperate for a love other than my mother's coddling.

"I have one more thing to show you," I said. I left the pool house and nearly leaped over the wooden fence. It wasn't until I got to my room and opened the desk drawer that I hesitated. The pictures were still there – her body still gracefully draped across the poolside lounge. Two distances capturing the same beauty. I placed the photos of her in an envelope and realized I needed to offer that moment back to her. We needed to start clean in order to have the relationship He desires.

When I stepped back into the pool house she was asleep on the couch. I lifted her arm and tucked the envelope beneath it. Then I pulled a blanket over her and turned the lights off. She needed to rest for the morning's performance.

But she didn't arrive for the early mass. Mrs. Taylor sat at her usual spot in the third row. She was awake this time, politely nodding along to the music and actively

participating during prayer. I substituted a song from the hymnal and the distribution of Eucharist passed lethargically. At closing procession she still had not arrived.

Mrs. Taylor held fast to her seat, though. By the second service my mother had joined her. It wasn't until the early afternoon mass that Marcia stepped through the heavy wooden doors to perform. Father Darling did not stop the sermon for her. He talked about the virtue of controlling passion. But I was not listening to him. Marcia was dressed beautifully in a sun dress. She walked up the aisle and sat next to me and I could only think of wildflowers.

But anger and resentment kept my hands clenched around the neck of my guitar. She offered no look of apology for missing the first four hours of the day we were to spend together. Her mouth did not voice any questions about how my performance had gone. Marcia had nothing to say to me. And at the moment we were to perform, the heat welling in my stomach nearly formed expletives and shot through the microphone. But I only moved my fingers over the strings of my guitar, and watched the floor while Marcia stood and took the stage.

She sang my words and my heart began to soften. While our mothers listened, Marcia began to sing her own lyrics.

“Like a pervert, offering impure photos back to their owner. Like a judgmental mother, opening up to her child.”

And before the song had ended, Marcia had tossed my lyric book on the floor. The pages were shredded. She walked off the stage back down the aisle. By Divine impulse, I followed.

Outside I watched her jump into that shirtless man's convertible. She looked up at me and offered her middle finger. The car sped off leaving a thick smoky residue in its wake. Parishioners began stepping through the doors, my mother and Mrs. Taylor included. They were all watching, so I didn't cry.

My mother later told me that some girls were just wild like that. Her place was San Francisco where she could slut it up all she wanted and not hurt innocent boys like me. But I wanted so bad not to be innocent, and I needed God's will to allow it.